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Ex-Georgian President: Mr. Trump, Putin does not bluff but you have the upper hand – use it



OPINION

By Mikheil Saakashvili, | Fox News



Trump to Putin: The world wants to see us get along

President Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin deliver opening remarks in Helsinki before their closed-door meeting.

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As in the U.S., politics in the former Soviet Union can be highly polarized. But in the run-up to President Donald Trump's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on Monday, many in my region share the same concern: Will the self-described "master negotiator" agree to a deal that poses an existential threat to American allies in Eastern Europe?

I am somewhat more optimistic about the summit's prospects for several reasons—but cautiously so.

First, I have known Trump for many years. In 2012, when I was the president of Georgia, he visited my country to evaluate potential real estate development.

After this visit, Trump praised our favorable business environment and simple taxation system. My team and I carried out the reforms that created this environment, and we did it to reject the Soviet legacy of corruption, opacity, and nepotism—which still characterize the Russian system. During our conversations, I had the sense that Trump understood this reality. I hope and believe his clear-eyed understanding of Russia's business environment bodes well for Monday's summit.

Second, while it is true that Putin tried to meddle in the U.S. elections and almost certainly favored Trump, it is also true that the Russian leader seriously miscalculated Trump's motivations. Putin expected to get an American version of his old Italian friend Silvio Berlusconi, who could be easily corrupted and manipulated. Instead, Putin got a determined, nationalistic, and highly unpredictable U.S. president—who staffed his national security team with well-known Russia hawks and Putin critics, such as John Bolton, Fiona Hill, and Gen. James Mattis.

Third, the Trump administration went beyond formal compliance with CAATSA in imposing historically harsh sanctions on Russian power brokers earlier this year. In my region, sanctioning government officials is not enough: Oligarchs and the authorities have always been inextricably linked.

For the first time in the history of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship, the Trump administration acknowledged this nuance, by imposing sanctions on politically-connected oligarchs. These sanctions dismantled any pretense that oligarchs are legitimate business owners by treating them as they are—subsidiaries of the Russian government.

I have several other reasons for optimism, including Trump's criticism of the Nord Stream II pipeline deal at this week's NATO summit and his authorization of lethal defensive weapons sales to Ukraine and Georgia last year—a dramatic reversal of Obama's policy.

In spite of these promising signs, however, I must caution Trump to avoid the mistakes his predecessors have made with regards to Putin's Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, I sensed a widespread perception among Americans that the U.S. had "won" the Cold War. Since then, American policymakers have consistently

underestimated Russia's ambitions. Many opinion leaders and policymakers believed we had reached "the end of history," where the liberal world order, predicated on self-determination, multilateralism, and territorial integrity, had triumphed for good over totalitarianism, imperialism, and bipolar spheres of influence.

The Western misperception of the Russian threat—in tandem with Putin's obsession with the "Western threat"—had devastating consequences for my region, including Putin's invasions and annexations of Georgia and Ukraine.

Unlike many of his Western counterparts, Putin does not bluff. He is honest about his ambitions. And why shouldn't he be honest, when he does not have to pay the political price? Nevertheless, Western leaders often fail to listen.

Unlike the American foreign policy agenda at times, the Russian agenda is clear and consistent. Putin will continue instigating and exploiting "frozen conflicts" in NATO-aspirant post-Soviet countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, so that no independent state in his backyard will be welcomed into the Western alliance. Moreover, by promoting nationalistic, extremist, and corrupt politicians in the former Soviet space, Putin weakens Russia's neighbors by amplifying social divisions.

The Helsinki summit is arguably the biggest test of Trump's foreign policy acumen thus far, and he cannot afford to fail.

As someone who has met with Vladimir Putin more than thirty times, has had to repeal his military attack and survived assassination threats from him, I have the following recommendations for President Trump: Be Reaganesque. Talk to the Russians, but start tough, and remember to "trust but verify" at each turn.

Both Presidents Bush and Obama made the same mistake of trying to reset relations with Russia early in their presidencies. By hiding the sticks and producing too many carrots, Bush and Obama attempted to demonstrate good will—which Putin interpreted as weakness. The language of sheer force is what Putin understands best.

President Trump should not lose sight of the fact that he doesn't owe Putin anything: Indeed, Trump holds the upper hand.

Despite Putin's bravado, the sanctions are hurting him tremendously. And the very fact of the meeting legitimizes Putin in the eyes of Russian elite, who were getting nervous during the long delay in holding the summit.

Now, it's America's turn to make demands. Russia should stop positioning itself as equal to the United States and stop pretending its foreign adventures, be they in Syria, Ukraine or Georgia, are part of a global fight against American expansionism. Moreover, Russia must stop threatening the U.S. with new weaponry, as Putin did during a recent address to the Russian Parliament.

Furthermore, Trump must dash Putin's hopes that the U.S. will ever accept Russia's land grabs in the former Soviet space. In this respect, not only Ukraine should be mentioned, but also Georgia—where Russia occupies one-fifth of the NATO ally's territory, in violation of a withdrawal agreement Moscow had previously signed.

The bottom line should be that America will respect the borders of Russia if Russia starts to respect the borders of its neighbors. Unlike many in my region, I believe Trump should make a deal with Putin, with very specific terms: America will not undermine Putin's regime inside Russia—Putin's greatest fear—if Putin stops undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries. Only if Russia withdraws unconditionally from Ukraine and Georgia should the U.S. agree to discuss lifting sanctions.

Finally, Trump—and the rest of the world—would do well to manage expectations. A real deal cannot be made at the very first summit, as Reagan's experience with Gorbachev demonstrated. When Gorbachev tried to sell their first summit in Iceland as a success, Reagan bluntly contradicted his Soviet counterpart. Only with calculated skepticism in the beginning will the U.S. achieve victory in the end.

Mikheil Saakashvili was the President of Georgia from 2004-2013 and led his country through the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. His perspective is shaped by his personal experience with Trump, Putin, and Russian interventionism as the head of state in a NATO-aspirant country partly occupied by Russia.

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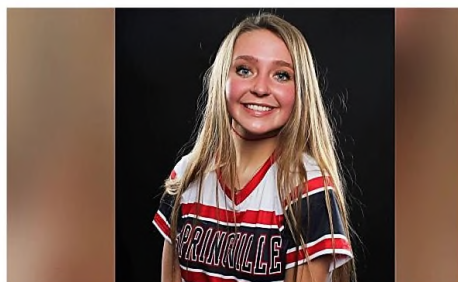
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OPINION | COMMENTARY

When Russia Invaded Georgia

It happened in 2008 and foretold a decade of Putin's adventurism.

By Mikheil Saakashvili

Aug. 7, 2018 6:56 pm ET



Russian soldiers hold their flag in Tskhinvali, Georgia, Aug. 11, 2008.

PHOTO: ANDREI SMIRNOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Like many other heads of state, I had planned to attend the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. I canceled my trip after Russian-backed separatists began firing on Georgian positions in the breakaway territory of South Ossetia. On Aug. 8, 2008—the day after full-scale war broke out in my country—the Olympics opening ceremony took place.

Long before its conventional assault on Georgia, Russia openly backed separatist militants, launched cyberattacks, and used disinformation to meddle in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Initial intelligence reports of Russian forces entering Georgian territory didn't even cause enough concern to order Georgian military officials back from their holidays. Though Moscow had long attempted to thwart Georgia's turn to the West, Russia had not launched a conventional military attack on a neighboring country since it invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

But in August 2008, under the auspices of “securing” the separatist enclave, Russia invaded my country. To say the Kremlin uses disproportionate force is an understatement: Russia bombed Georgian positions with more than 200 aircraft, while the Georgian air force had fewer than a dozen combat aircraft in service. Some 80,000 Russian land troops deployed to Georgia; our entire army stood at less than 30,000.

Yet some in the West, like then-Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, faulted Georgia. Leaving aside the practical impossibility of Georgia attacking a nuclear power 100 times its size, the entirety of the conflict took place on internationally recognized Georgian territory. The Kremlin’s claim that its land forces mobilized overnight in response to an emergency was absurd. Such an onslaught required careful preparation, especially given the mountainous terrain of the Russian-Georgian border.

Russian military operations also were not confined to South Ossetia. Russian armed forces advanced toward Georgia’s capital. Georgian troops, who resisted with a fierceness the Russians had not expected, held off their march to Tbilisi. In the days that followed, the international community played a critical role in halting the Russian offensive. The Bush administration notably sent a “humanitarian convoy” to Georgia, deterring further aggression with cruise-missile-armed warships and military aircraft.

A decade later, in direct violation of the cease-fire agreement, thousands of Russian troops still occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory. The repercussions of those five days in August remain widespread. Vladimir Putin’s biggest victory was exposing rifts in the West. Many European and U.S. leaders swiftly and unequivocally condemned Russia. But lobbyists on the Kremlin’s payroll, and Western governments engaged in lucrative energy and defense deals with Moscow, placed the blame on Georgia.

Mr. Putin continues to exploit those fault lines today. The Kremlin finances fringe European political movements on the right and left. In the U.S., Russian-funded disinformation on social media fuels the breakdown of civil discourse.

The lack of a unified response to the Georgia crisis also underscores how many in the West still underestimate Russia’s ambitions. This puzzles me. Mr. Putin, a former KGB officer, has never hidden his aspirations to control former Soviet states. Before the war, I had warned Georgia’s trans-Atlantic partners that a Russian invasion was possible—and so had Mr. Putin.

Countries like mine bore the brunt of Mr. Putin's aggression. Georgia is a natural target: We have always seen ourselves as part of the Western world, and Russia likewise views us as the frontline of Western civilization. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told me before the war, Russia outmaneuvers the U.S. in places where Russia perceives the stakes to be higher.

Many of our partners in the West failed to realize that the Georgian conflict was not ultimately about Georgia. The generally lackluster international response to the invasion and occupation emboldened Russian adventurism in the country's "near abroad." Along with Lech Kaczyński, the late president of Poland, I warned that Ukraine would be the next Putin target. Few took this warning seriously in 2008. Six years later, our prediction came true.

After years of aggression in the post-Soviet space, Russia now has graduated to confronting the West directly. Mr. Putin, like all tyrants, hopes to secure his regime by undermining democracy. He is succeeding. Russian information operations, cyberattacks and election meddling have exposed serious vulnerabilities in the democratic institutions Americans once took for granted.

How can the West respond? Approach Russia as it is. Mr. Putin is not going to stop until he is stopped. He views concessions from the West as signs of weakness and pushes for more.

Seizing Georgian territories and Crimea was not merely about gaining territory. Russia creates and perpetuates frozen conflicts to prevent aspiring members from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Georgia, the largest non-NATO contributor of troops to Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan, has long demonstrated dedication to the alliance. Russia has no right to veto NATO membership for any of its neighbors, and all members of the alliance must acknowledge this. NATO-aspirant countries in Russia's backyard, like Georgia and Ukraine, should be offered a realistic road map to accession.

Strengthening the U.S. military and the trans-Atlantic alliance will be the decisive factor in stopping Mr. Putin. Cutting off the regime's access to capital markets will expedite the process. The sanctions against Russian officials and oligarchs announced in April by the Trump administration are encouraging. The European Union and the U.S. cannot budge on sanctions until Russia withdraws from illegally occupied territories, fully and unconditionally.

The more Russia pushes against the West, the more the West should push back. The West has the upper hand but consistently fails to play it. As long as this continues, the invasion of Georgia will echo louder and louder.

Mr. Saakashvili served as president of Georgia, 2004-13.

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RESPONSE

Make Georgia Great Again

Georgia's presidential election is a referendum on a government that has reversed its predecessor's gains.

By Mikheil Saakashvili

NOVEMBER 8, 2018, 10:53 AM

In his Nov. 5 article "When Georgians Go Low, Other Georgians Go Lower," Thomas de Waal wrote of the Georgian presidential election: "[T]o concentrate on the personalities is mostly to miss the point." De Waal went on to do exactly that, characterizing the most competitive Georgian presidential campaign in recent memory as a "grudge match" between ruling Georgian Dream party chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili and myself. Though it is true that I support the United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze, while Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream backs Salome Zurbishvili, this is not the primary reason that 61.36 percent of Georgians voted against the ruling party's candidate in the first round. Rather, the classic American adage is as applicable as ever in Georgia today: It's the economy, stupid.

The facts speak for themselves. Let's start with the issue at the forefront of Georgian voters' minds: unemployment. This is not surprising, since the majority of the workforce is unemployed, dependent on remittances, or engaged in subsistence farming. According to International Republican Institute (IRI) polling from April, 62 percent of Georgians named "unemployment" as a main problem—alongside the ruling party's "unfulfilled promises" and a general sense of "economic deterioration." By contrast, just 3 percent mentioned my party, the United National Movement, as a concern.

GDP growth has stagnated—and even slightly decreased overall—under Georgian Dream, after it quadrupled during my presidency. Meanwhile, perceptions of heightened inequality and corruption drive dissatisfaction with the ruling party. Ivanishvili's personal fortune is estimated to equal as much as half of Georgia's GDP, and his cronies have likewise prospered in government positions: Last month, Rustavi 2—Georgia's most popular TV channel—

sparked public outrage after airing drone footage of Georgian Dream officials' lavish residences (almost all purchased in the names of relatives).

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Inauguration of Georgia's first woman president is not a sign of progress, but a troubling step back



(<https://ecrparty.eu/>)

Despite critical assessments of Georgia's November 28 runoff presidential election from much of the international community (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/georgia-s-presidential-campaign-damages-its-democratic-credentials>) – observers expressed

(<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true>) alarm about political violence, intimidation, vote-buying on an "unprecedented

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(<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>) scale, and outright electoral fraud (<https://www.rti.org/publications/statement>)

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national-democratic-institute-second-round-georgia-s-2018-presidential) – the victory of ruling party candidate **Salome Zurbishvili** largely made headlines for a more positive reason: As the fifth president of Georgia, she is the first woman to hold the office.

Though Zurbishvili's win is indeed a milestone for Georgia's political development, it does not mark progress, but a massive step backward. Not long ago, the country was perceived as a heartening outlier in a difficult region: Following the peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003, then-President **Mikheil Saakashvili** embarked on an ambitious reform program that transformed Georgia from a failed state into a pro-Western democracy. Unsurprisingly, Russian President **Vladimir Putin** viewed such a success story in Russia's backyard as a threat to his regime. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and occupies about a fifth of the country's territory to this day. According to then-US Secretary of State **Condoleezza Rice**, a central objective of Russia's intervention in Georgia (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/russia-invaded-georgia-10-years-ago-dont-say-america-didnt-respond/2018/08/08/ba4279d4-9b3e-11e8-8d5e-c6c594024954_story.html?utm_term=.33724b2d09ad) was to depose Saakashvili.

In a peaceful transition of power – the first in the country's history – Saakashvili stepped down in 2012, following his party's loss to oligarch **Bidzina Ivanishvili**'s Georgian Dream coalition. But in the years since, Georgia's democratic institutions have eroded, and Zurbishvili's election stands out as the most dramatic example yet of this backsliding. Not only did her campaign seriously damage Georgia's democratic credentials – which now stand in stark contrast to monitors' glowing assessment of the December 9 snap parliamentary elections in neighbouring Armenia (<https://www.rferl.org/a/monitors-hail-armenia-s-snap-polls-call-for-further-electoral-reforms/29647816.html>) – but Zurbishvili's Pyrrhic victory was welcomed by Putin's allies.

United Russia member **Konstantin Kosachev**, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Duma's upper house, said in a comment carried by Russian state-run broadcaster TASS on November 29 that the contested Georgian election result was "positive" and expressed hope that "the space for dialogue" between Moscow and Tbilisi, presumably over the status of the Russian-occupied Georgian territories, "would enlarge."

Anton Morozov, a Duma member from the far-right Liberal Democratic Party, predicted that Georgian-Russian relations would "markedly improve" with Zurbishvili's presidency, and Deputy Foreign Minister **Grigory Karasin** echoed this optimism to members of the media from Ria Novosti, a tightly controlled state news agency, also on November 29.

The warm response from Moscow is not surprising – Zurbishvili has long pushed the Kremlin's narrative about Georgia, claiming that the Georgian side provoked the Russian invasion in 2008 and that the US shares the blame (https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20080808.OBS6731/les-reactions-au-conflit-entre-la-georgie-et-l-ossetie.html?fbclid=IwAR0SdtgIIZyZQz8yEnbHo745HH_TyOz46RwNX5_zWWz86ioVB1D4S7t91Fc).

Indeed, Putin himself has quoted Zurbishvili's writing to justify Russian aggression (<http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/1903/?fbclid=IwAR3r6SECU1RULK3bY8JvSRaEp9KYsFRyWfZzkoZTctYFOhLv80ZIXvZTm-I>) in Georgia.

Perhaps this is why the most regressive political forces in Georgia – including the fringe pro-Kremlin (<https://primetime.ge/news/1540893054-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A5-%E1%83%92%E1%83%98%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A0%E1%83%92%E1%83%98-%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98%E1%83%90>

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(<https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/98925-georgian-march-sets-conditions-for-supporting-zurabishvili-in-second-round-run-off.html?rund=1541086071>)" movement, both of which receive funding from Moscow – voiced support for Zurabishvili in the runoff. According to Tbilisi-based journalist (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-first-woman-president-in-the-caucasus-is-already-facing-death-threats?ref=scroll>) **Natalia Antelava**, the powers that pushed Zurabishvili to victory "are among the most xenophobic and sexist on Georgia's political spectrum."

Thus, it is a mistake to praise Zurabishvili's campaign as a victory for women in politics. Shortly before the runoff, portraits of male Georgian Dream leaders – including Ivanishvili himself – replaced Zurabishvili's face on billboards across the country. Not only did this move shatter any remaining illusion of Zurabishvili as an "independent" candidate, but it drew criticism from a coalition of Georgia's most reputable gender equality NGOs, who stated that (<https://civil.ge/archives/266236>) Zurabishvili's campaign "damaged the ideals of gender equality and further marginalised female politicians". Women's rights groups also criticised (<https://civil.ge/archives/266236>) the ruling party for attempting to present Zurabishvili as "a victim of gender-based discrimination, without being able to point to specific facts."

In short, the election of the first woman president merely serves as a fig-leaf to distract from the uncomfortable reality: Georgia has lost its position as the regional leader in democratic development. What's more, the country's once-unimpeachable credentials as a steadfast ally of the West are now under question. If Georgia's international partners want to salvage any of the country's hard-won progress, they would do well to look beyond the headlines.

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The Day Georgian Democracy Died

By Mikheil Saakashvili - January 15, 2019



Georgian activists take part in a protest rally in Georgia, in Tbilisi, Georgia, 07 August 2018. EPA-EFE/ZURAB KURTSIKIDZE

Though the US presidential election of 2016 may be the most infamous of Russia's attempts to interfere in democratic processes abroad, it certainly was not the first. For years, the Russian government has honed its tactics in domestic elections, then targeted Eastern Partnership countries, and ultimately, scaled up these influence operations to shake the West's faith in democracy. Unfortunately, I speak from first-hand experience: In the Kremlin's war for influence, Russian President Vladimir Putin has used Georgia as his proving ground.

Like any tyrant, Putin perceives democratic countries – especially those along Russia's border – as threats to his regime. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in my pro-Western, reformist government, the Kremlin has displayed escalating aggression in its attempts to bring my country back from the brink of freedom. Moscow has orchestrated cyber-attacks, funded fringe political movements, and even launched a conventional invasion in 2008. Over 20% of Georgian territory is occupied to this day, in violation of ceasefire agreements and international law, and Russian armed forces continue the illegal construction of fences along whatever they deem to be the "border" on any given day.

Beyond conventional warfare, Putin's regime has also targeted Georgia with relentless streams of propaganda to establish an exclusive sphere of influence over the region. Entities connected to the Russian government finance conferences, media outlets, and NGOs, united by a mission to discredit liberal values and erode democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, Georgia remained a rare success story in a challenging region.

...Until, one day, it wasn't.

Reasonable people may disagree on the exact timeline of Georgia's democratic backsliding. Did it start on November 28, 2018, when – according to Chatham House – a fraud-riddled presidential election "damaged" my country's hard-won "democratic credentials?" Or was it a few weeks earlier when the Transparency International Secretariat expressed its alarm over "state capture" in Georgia?

But in hindsight, many would admit that democracy died much earlier: October 1, 2012, when Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay dividends. On that day, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition won the parliamentary elections – thanks in no small part to Kremlin-backed information operations aimed at misleading the Georgian public. Ivanishvili, whose climb to the peaks of wealth is only dimly understood, earned his fortune in Russia as the largest individual shareholder of state energy giant Gazprom. He has a known net worth today of \$4.6 billion – equivalent to nearly a third of Georgia's GDP. Perhaps most alarming, he holds no official position, so he is completely unaccountable to the Georgian people.

Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's once-promising democracy has come to resemble the patronage system in Putin's Russia. Therefore, it is not surprising that Georgia's westward trajectory has faltered since Ivanishvili rose to power. In February 2018, the US Director of National Intelligence issued the agency's Worldwide Threat Assessment, which highlighted the oligarch's propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and – in the face of an existential threat from Russia – weakening Georgia from within. High-level corruption, burgeoning crime, economic stagnation, and a politicised court system contribute to widespread popular discontent.

Despite this grim reality, Ivanishvili and his ruling party insist that Georgian democracy has never been stronger. In doing so, they erode the public's faith in democracy and replace it with cynicism. Among the disillusioned, Russian soft power flourishes.

Over the past six years, Ivanishvili has effectively done Putin's job for him: Georgia has come to resemble a microcosm of Russia. Consider, for example, the recent presidential election. Throughout the campaign, the pro-Western opposition fell victim to distinctly Russian-style election-meddling tactics. Hackers targeted campaign-linked social media accounts, including my own, while Facebook bots boosted the ruling party candidate. Russian-style "troll factories," like the St Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency charged with meddling in U.S. elections, wielded disinformation to mislead – and often terrorise – voters.

In parallel, Georgian Dream officials launched a concerted effort to impose uniform discourse on the public square. Independent media, as in Russia, was a prime target. When the director of Georgia's most popular TV channel criticised the ruling party's presidential candidate, Georgian Dream Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze called him a "failed, inept fascist." When reputable civil society leaders spoke out in defence of press freedom, Kobakhidze smeared them as "accomplices of fascism."

Then, as in Putin's Russia, the ruling party attempted to control the public through fear. Throughout the campaign, Ivanishvili and his allies referred to the opposition as a "criminal, dirty force" rather than a legitimate political movement. With this inflammatory rhetoric, the authorities not only demonised opposition politicians like me – but also, and perhaps more dangerous, they cast the hundreds of thousands of Georgians who vote against the ruling party as enemies of the state.

Following the opposition's strong performance in the first round of the election, Georgian Dream officials began threatening "civil war" in the event of our coalition's victory. Such ominous statements track with the Kremlin's narrative, which holds that Georgians are incapable of self-government – and moreover, that unrest in Georgia requires Russian intervention for "peace-keeping."

Finally, Ivanishvili and the ruling party applied distinctly Putinist electoral techniques to reshape Georgia's political landscape in the image of Russia's. Just as "dead souls" turn out in droves to vote for Putin's United Russia party, Georgian Dream used the IDs of deceased people – and falsified voter

play scripted roles in a satirical performance of democracy. One of them, the overtly pro-Kremlin fringe party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, rushed to host rallies against my coalition – in effect, boosting Ivanishvili's candidate – the week before the runoff. Though it may seem absurd for a self-proclaimed "opposition party" to stage protests in favor of the government, it's just another day in Putin's Georgia.

In 2012, Georgia's international partners praised me for presiding over my country's first peaceful transition of power, following a free and fair election. But refusing to step down, or clinging to power through force and fraud, never crossed my mind. I had championed democracy throughout my two terms as president, and I was determined to leave my country's highest office upholding the same values that had guided me there.

Nevertheless, I understood on that day what the world has now realized six years later – that authoritarian forces can destroy democracy by weaponising the very institutions that comprise it. Though Georgia is an especially soft target, we have seen that the West is not immune. Today, as rising tides of populism and authoritarianism threaten to drown internationalism, it is only by amplifying engagement with democratic forces (and holding accountable undemocratic ones) in the Eastern Partnership that the rest of Europe can avoid Georgia's fate. Likewise, strengthening NATO's capabilities and commitments to collective defense – and welcoming NATO-aspirant countries who share the values of the alliance – is crucial to protecting liberal norms and values from Putin's ambitions.

Those who wish to uphold liberal values worldwide ought to take Georgia as a cautionary tale: Putin does not need to invade another country when he can control it from within.

Mikheil Saakashvili

+ posts

Mikheil Saakashvili is the former president of Georgia (2004-2013) and former governor of Ukraine's Odessa Region (2015-2016).



ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

Russia's Next Land Grab Won't Be in an Ex-Soviet State. It Will Be in Europe.

First he came for Georgia, then for Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's next target is likely to be a non-NATO nation in the EU.

By Mikheil Saakashvili

MARCH 15, 2019, 6:46 AM

Not many observers would consider the world's coldest shipping lane a geopolitical hotspot. But that may be about to change. Last week, reports emerged that a new Kremlin policy will require all international naval ships to give Russia 45 days' notice before entering the Northern Sea Route, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via the Arctic waters north of Siberia. Every vessel on the route, where Russia has invested heavily in sophisticated military infrastructure, will also be required to have a Russian maritime pilot on board. Ships found in violation of these restrictions may be forcibly halted, detained, or—in unspecified “extreme” circumstances—“eliminated.”

The Kremlin's latest threat has gone largely unnoticed, perhaps because it's no surprise. Russian officials justify the new naval restrictions with a familiar explanation, claiming that “the more active naval operations in the Arctic of various foreign countries” require such a response.

This is the same tactic Russian President Vladimir Putin has used to justify his military adventurism for years: From Georgia in 2008, to Ukraine in 2014, to Syria in 2015, Putin has always laid the blame for Russian aggression squarely at the West's feet. Kremlin-backed media outlets amplify this message, subjecting audiences to a constant deluge of scaremongering about “NATO encirclement” and pointing to the West's condemnations of Putin's actions as evidence of “Russophobia.”

Many wonder what Putin gains from pushing this narrative. In violating international norms, he has become a global pariah. U.S. and European sanctions have dealt serious blows to Russia's already dismal economy—raising

the question of why would Putin pay such a staggering price to carve out a few more pieces of territory.

Those who attempt to answer this question miss the point. In Crimea, eastern Ukraine, South Ossetia, or anywhere else Putin considers Russia's backyard, territorial gain has never been an end in itself. Putin's goal today is the same as when he invaded my country in 2008: to tighten his grip on the levers of power in Russia. Whenever Putin's domestic popularity dips, he either escalates an ongoing conflict or launches a new offensive.

Whenever Putin's domestic popularity dips, he either escalates an ongoing conflict or launches a new offensive.

And, clearly, it works. Putin has ruled the largest country in the world for nearly two decades, consolidating more control as he weathers each crisis. Ordinary Russian voters may struggle to survive on pensions of \$200 each month, but Putin's base can be proud to live in a superpower.

Putin is both predictable and logical: Invading a weaker neighbor delivers a cheaper and faster ratings boost than, say, improving Russia's dystopian health care system. It's no coincidence that Putin's approval rating peaked in 2015, after the annexation of Crimea. Later that year, as the Russian economy foundered, the intervention in Syria served to shore up patriotism. Moreover, Russia's actions in Syria marked Putin's graduation from military adventurism in the former Soviet states to power projection beyond Russia's "near abroad."

To be sure, these steps earned Putin harsh criticism from Washington and Brussels. But condemnation from outside Russia only boosts his popularity within. With every foreign election the Kremlin meddles in, every violation of human rights in occupied Crimea, and every time Russian soldiers move barbed-wire fencing to carve out a few more acres of Georgia's territory, the standard U.S. and European response—a diplomatic expression of "deep concern"—sounds more like a tired cliché.

From the invasion of Georgia to the hybrid offensive in Ukraine, Western leaders have demarcated red line after red line for Putin to trample with

impunity. The weakness of international norms, of the rules-based liberal order which many in Washington and Brussels endorse but few dare to defend, makes Moscow look ever stronger. In the eyes of his domestic supporters, Putin is calling the West's bluff.

From the invasion of Georgia to the hybrid offensive in Ukraine, Western leaders have demarcated red line after red line for Putin to trample with impunity.

But the status quo cannot hold. If we have learned anything from the past two decades, a new crisis is on the horizon. According to a [March 7 poll](#) by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Russian voters' trust in Putin has fallen to 32 percent—the lowest level since 2006.

True to form, Putin has been escalating provocations in recent months as his popularity has declined. In November, Russian forces fired upon and detained three Ukrainian naval ships attempting to pass through the Kerch Strait into the Sea of Azov. More than 100 days have passed, and the outcry from the international community has long since died down. But the 24 Ukrainian sailors arrested during that incident remain in illegal detention.

Putin's violations of laws and norms in Russia's "backyard" no longer seem to shock the world. He has already redrawn the borders of Europe by force and gotten away with it. Now, to provoke the West's ire, he will have to do something even more egregious.

It is not a question of whether he will attack, but where. Some point to [Belarus](#), but Putin stands to gain little through a show of force in a country that most Russians already consider an integral part of Russia. Others predict that the Baltic nations of [Estonia](#), Latvia, or Lithuania will be the next target. Putin certainly views the small Baltic countries as a threat; after all, they are functioning democracies on Russia's border. But, for now, the Baltics are probably safe, for two reasons.

It is not a question of whether he will attack, but where.

First, the next frontier of Russian aggression is unlikely to be a NATO ally. The inconsistent responses of the West to Moscow's various land grabs have only emboldened Putin, but he is not quite bold enough to risk triggering NATO's Article 5—which could lead to all-out conventional war against a U.S.-led alliance. Putin understands when he is outmatched. If that weren't the case, he would not have survived this long.

Second, Putin's next adventure will likely be outside the former Soviet Union. The West has grudgingly accepted his neoimperialist ambitions in the region. Further incursions into Ukraine, Georgia, or other non-NATO Soviet successor states would be *deja vu* all over again, which would do little to bolster Putin's position.

I have had the misfortune of getting to know Putin better than most people. Drawing on this firsthand knowledge, I predict a different direction of escalation.

Russia's most likely target in the near future is either Finland or Sweden; although both are members of the EU, they are not members of NATO. By attacking a non-NATO country, Putin does not risk a proportional response in accordance with Article 5. But by targeting a European country, he can expect to reap the rewards of public approval at home from voters who are desperate for a victory. This is a simple cost-benefit analysis that Putin has conducted, openly, many times before. Each investment of Russian force has paid dividends. Finland and Sweden meet both requirements.

I do not expect Russian tanks to roll into Helsinki or Stockholm unopposed. But it would be relatively simple for Moscow to execute a land grab in a remote Arctic enclave or on a small island, like Sweden's Gotland, considering the strategic capabilities Russia has built on its northern flank. After all, who would go to war over a frozen Baltic island or piece of Finland's tundra? NATO wouldn't, but Putin would—because the stakes are higher for him.

I do not expect Russian tanks to roll into Helsinki or Stockholm unopposed. But it would be relatively simple for Moscow to execute a land grab in a remote Arctic enclave or on a small island

Russian aggression on Scandinavian territory—in countries everyone in the West considers part of the West—might seem far-fetched. However, it was not long ago that Putin’s annexation of Crimea, which I predicted, struck even Russia hawks as an outlandish doomsday scenario. A few years earlier Russia’s invasion of Georgia, despite my dire warnings, also took the world by surprise.

Former Soviet states, even if they are NATO members like Estonia, are widely perceived as not quite Western. This perception may be inaccurate, but in politics, perception often matters more than reality. For Finland and Sweden, though, perception and reality are aligned. They are not ex-Soviet republics; they are unquestionably part of the West.

From Georgia to Ukraine, Syria, and beyond, Putin’s trajectory has been clear. By defying the norms imposed by the West, he has—in his view—taken progressively greater steps toward emancipating himself. But he will only achieve full emancipation by confronting the West directly.

This may sound shocking, but Putin has shocked the world many times over. The West cannot afford to be caught off guard again.

Mikheil Saakashvili is head of the National Reform Council of Ukraine and was president of Georgia from 2004 to 2013.

TAGS: ARCTIC AND ANTARCTIC, EU, FINLAND, GEORGIA, MILITARY, NATO, RUSSIA, SWEDEN, UKRAINE, VLADIMIR PUTIN

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion | The oligarchs are suffocating what's left of democracy in Eastern Europe

By Mikheil Saakashvili

March 21, 2019 at 10:00 a.m. EDT

Mikheil Saakashvili served as president of Georgia from 2004 until 2013.

Days before the hotly contested Ukrainian presidential election on March 31, incumbent Petro Poroshenko's party faces credible allegations of voter bribery. It's not hard to guess what will happen next. The oligarchic clique will steal the election, and in response, international observers will accuse local authorities of vote-rigging. But instead of addressing the symptoms of democratic backsliding, it's time to treat the root cause: informal power.

Moldova offers a textbook example. Oil and banking tycoon Vladimir Plahotniuc bankrolls the country's second-largest political force and has forged alliances with other parties to consolidate power. Although Plahotniuc exerts total control over parliament, law enforcement and the courts, he has no interest in running for office. His nickname in Moldova is "the puppeteer," and the elections last month only strengthened his hold on the country.

Moldova has a per capita gross domestic product of just \$3,226. Plahotniuc's wealth is estimated at \$3 billion, making him a million times wealthier than the average constituent. Unsurprisingly, true power resides with him, not with elected officials. The same applies to two other countries bordering Russia: Georgia and Ukraine.

When I was president of Georgia, our country was lauded as the top reformer in the world. Today, Georgia has its own Plahotniuc: Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of the ruling party. He has a known net worth of \$4.9 billion, equivalent to nearly one-third of the country's GDP. How he accrued this wealth — in Russia, of course — is dimly understood. Ivanishvili rules Georgia as his fiefdom, with loyal courts and a repressive security apparatus.

Ivanishvili's political engagement is not driven by his vision for Georgia's future. One would be hard-pressed to describe his party's platform, policy proposals or any substantive achievements since he came to power in 2012. Rather, Ivanishvili viewed his party as yet another investment — and he is reaping the returns. Exerting informal control over public institutions, the oligarch has monopolized Georgia's economy. Transparency International recently singled out Georgia as an egregious example of "state capture."

Ukraine, larger than Moldova and Georgia, has more than one oligarch. The wealthiest is Rinat Akhmetov, a steel magnate whose factories have sustained Kremlin-backed separatists in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Akhmetov has forged an unholy alliance with the Ukrainian president, a fellow billionaire. Poroshenko, closely linked to an investment firm with a stake in Akhmetov's energy company, appoints members to the regulatory committee that sets energy prices. When the committee (chaired by a former executive at Poroshenko's company) passed energy subsidies in 2016, the biggest beneficiaries were, naturally, firms linked to Akhmetov and Poroshenko himself.

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine share another challenge: They are partially occupied by Russia, and their aggressive neighbor is often blamed for their failures in democratic development. Russian President Vladimir Putin fears nothing more than the prospect of flourishing democracies in his backyard.

But instead of fighting back, the Moldovan, Georgian and Ukrainian elites are doing Putin's work for him. This may come as a surprise, since all three governments are ostensibly pro-Western. They make up the European Union's Eastern Partnership and contribute troops to NATO missions. Moreover, voters in these countries generally support transparency, democracy and closer ties with the West. This is why oligarch-backed ruling parties are careful to pay lip service to "Euro-Atlantic integration" even as they fail to execute the reforms necessary to realize this goal.

It's no coincidence that all three puppeteers made their fortunes in Russia. Their business interests supersede national interests. Putin is not known for charity; any oligarch who made billions in Russia is in crippling debt to the Kremlin. Although the Northern menace cannot be overestimated, the greatest enemy lies within. A captured state is a weak state, vulnerable to foreign aggression. And for many under informal rule, the only path out of poverty — besides criminality or nepotism — is emigration. Brain drain leaves a smaller and hungrier population at home, so oligarchs can buy votes more cheaply than ever. Putin could not be more pleased with this vicious cycle.

Why should the West care? Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine receive billions in aid from the E.U., the United States and the International Monetary Fund, to which the United States is the largest donor. This funding is intended to support anti-corruption reforms, and recipient governments are required to make progress on these initiatives for continued disbursements.

In reality, the "reform-for-aid" cycle is hardly so straightforward. Georgia is the world's largest per capita recipient of U.S. aid — and one of the world's most dramatic examples of democratic backsliding. Ukraine has received nearly \$13 billion from the IMF, on top of nearly \$2 billion in direct assistance from U.S. taxpayers, since 2014 — despite the Poroshenko administration's failure to fulfill its commitments to fight corruption. In Moldova, where more than a billion dollars (about 12 percent of the economy) was apparently stolen from the central bank, the absence of meaningful reform does not inspire confidence that the \$183 million in IMF loans will be used as intended.

The United States must treat corruption as the national security threat it is, and uphold American values in countries that benefit from American support. In captured states with shadow rulers, corruption cannot be eradicated by targeting officials alone. Oligarchs must also be sanctioned. Plahotniuc, Ivanishvili and Akhmetov are not legitimate businessmen; they are subsidiaries and shareholders of their own governments.

By ensuring the correct use of aid, sanctions on informal power brokers would defend the interests of U.S. taxpayers while strengthening democracies in Eastern Europe. Only by breaking the oligarchs' stranglehold to build strong democracies from within can the people of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova defeat Putinism. This victory will be felt the world over.

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OPINION • Published April 23, 2019 10:34am EDT

Mikheil Saakashvili: Ukraine's presidential election should send a clear message to every politician



OPINION

By Mikheil Saakashvili | Fox News



Volodymyr Zelensky, an actor with no political background, unseated Ukraine's president, Petro Poroshenko, in an election on Sunday.

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From [Brexit](#) to Trump's victory to Bolsonaro's win in Brazil, the past few years have seen voters across the globe upending the establishment. Nevertheless, as U.S. presidential contenders throw their hats in the ring for [2020](#), polling shows that Democrats favor nominating an "experienced political insider."

But those who anticipate a return to “politics as usual” are making a big mistake: The revolt against the status quo shows no sign of stopping. If Ukraine’s [presidential election](#) on Sunday is any indicator, it’s only intensifying.

UKRAINE PRESIDENTIAL VOTE WON BY ACTOR VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY IN LANDSLIDE

Volodymyr Zelensky, whose political experience consists of playing a fictional president on TV, beat incumbent president Petro Poroshenko by a record-high margin of nearly 50 points. In other words, Ukrainians just delivered the most dramatic rejection of the political class in recent memory.

This landslide has triggered a predictable backlash from the establishment. Mainstream media is speculating on the supposed risks of electing a “comedian” to the highest office in the land.

Some foreign policy analysts have derisively compared Zelensky to Trump; liberal pundit Andrea Chalupa recently warned Ukrainians about “what a politically untested TV star can do to a country.” And Zelensky’s win sent shock waves through Washington think tank circles, where some claim that his inexperience means his presidency will be a “disaster.”

Sound familiar?

What these experts fail to understand is that Zelensky won not in spite of his outsider status but because of it.

Ukraine’s political establishment has promised voters the world for nearly three decades – and then failed to deliver. Though Western partners have praised Poroshenko for making “progress on reform,” such “progress” is meaningless if it fails to improve people’s lives.

Ukraine has become the poorest country in Europe, while Poroshenko’s personal income increased nearly a hundredfold last year. It should come as no surprise that voters are hungry for something new.

Establishment criticism of political outsiders often backfires because it reinforces what voters already know: Many of those considered “experts” are remarkably out-of-touch with ordinary people.

Take Chalupa's comment about Trump. The average Ukrainian, barely surviving on less than \$300 a month, wants nothing more than the opportunity and prosperity America has experienced in the Trump era.

The disconnect between expert opinions and ordinary people's reality was clear by 2016 when I resigned as governor of Ukraine's Odessa region to become one of Poroshenko's most vocal opponents.

With this election, the poverty, corruption, and abuses of power I witnessed have finally culminated in Ukrainians' rejection of the status quo.

Like Trump and other unconventional leaders, Zelensky succeeded in channeling popular discontent because he understands the power of social media to speak directly to the people.

Throughout his campaign, he addressed supporters in impromptu Facebook and Instagram videos instead of scripted ads and stump speeches. It wasn't easy -- fake news is an epidemic in Ukraine, and brutal smear attempts marred the election. But by using his online platform to connect with voters authentically, without the pretenses of traditional campaigning, Zelensky fought back and won.

And now the real battle begins. Voters have given Zelensky a mandate to upend the system, and it won't be easy. Even so, I'm more optimistic than ever about Ukraine's future.

Why? Because Zelensky's core promise -- to destroy the failed system and rebuild it from the ground up -- can only be realized by an outsider.

As president of Georgia, I learned progress in post-Communist countries must be radical to succeed. A government predicated on graft, nepotism, and bribery cannot be reformed in the traditional sense. It must be overhauled. This uncompromising ethos drove me and my team to turn Georgia from a failed state into the world's top reformer.

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And unlike Poroshenko, whose kleptocracy pushed away many advisors (including me), Zelensky is inclined toward creative destruction. His program details concrete plans to jump-start judicial reforms, curb the administrative state, and streamline anti-corruption infrastructure. To do this, he is building a team of Western-oriented professionals – and has suggested he would welcome my perspective too.

Zelensky's victory sends a clear message to all politicians, in Ukraine and beyond: The global anti-establishment trend isn't reversing anytime soon. And that's probably for the best.

Mikheil Saakashvili was the President of Georgia from 2004-2013 and led his country through the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. His perspective is shaped by his personal experience with Trump, Putin, and Russian interventionism as the head of state in a NATO-aspirant country partly occupied by Russia.

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Don't underestimate the threat of Georgia's "knight in shining armour"



(From left to right) Georgian ultra-nationalist Levan Vasadze, Alexander Dugin, a Russian neo-imperialist and anti-Western firebrand largely credited with helping shape Vladimir Putin's doctrine of 'Eurasianism'; Emmanuel Leroy, the former head of communications for the Alliance France Europe Russia in Moldova's capital Chisinau for the "From the Atlantic to the Pacific: For the Common Destiny of the Eurasian Peoples" conference, 27 May 2017.

(<https://ecrparty.eu/>)

When I first encountered ultra-conservative Georgian millionaire **Levan Vasadze** at a rally in Tbilisi last year, I didn't take him seriously. How could I? Dressed as a medieval knight on horseback and flanked by Orthodox priests, he led several thousand followers down Rustaveli Avenue. The occasion: A protest against a small demonstration marking the International Day Against Homophobia.

Like many international observers of Georgia, I saw Vasadze as a provocateur at the fringes of public life. His antics struck me as entertaining, too ridiculous to be dangerous. Amid the grim process of state capture (<https://voices.transparency.org/from-concentrated-power-to-state-capture-georgias-backsliding-anti-corruption-reforms-c94d76bb2b21?gl=1e3473c5e412>) by pro-Russian oligarch **Bidzina Ivanishvili**, Vasadze's sensationalist rhetoric (<https://eurasianet.org/georgia-family->

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gathering-commemorates-anti-gay-riot) – liberalism is “an immoral diabolical cult” and credit cards prepare society for “the coming of the anti-Christ” – provided absurdist reprieves from politics as usual.

But on 16 June, as I watched Vasadze’s speech to a crowd gathered to protest Tbilisi’s upcoming gay pride parade, I realized my mistake. I had underestimated him.

His talking points echoed **Alexander Dugin**, a Russian ultra-nationalist widely considered (<https://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/the-dangerous-philosopher-behind-putins-strategy-to-grow-russian-power-at-americas-expense>) to be the Kremlin’s chief ideologist. Not coincidentally, Vasadze is a close associate (<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>) of Dugin. Vasadze attends Dugin’s forums on “Eurasianist” philosophy, which elevates Russia as the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Christian world. If Dugin’s “Eurasia” were a reality, Georgia would be a vassal state subordinate to Moscow. So too would Ukraine, Moldova, and other former Soviet states with large Orthodox Christian populations. And Russia, according to Dugin (<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>), would be “the only national community within a supranational imperial complex.”

In Tbilisi on 13 June, Vasadze stopped short of openly endorsing Russian imperialism, sticking to more popular stances. He began his address in Georgian, with his usual message: The survival of the nation depends on the preservation of traditional family values, and the West is destroying these values by promoting the “gay agenda.”

But then, he added something new (<https://eurasianet.org/anti-gay-militia-plans-to-thwart-tbilisi-pride>): A promise to “organise citizens’ brigades.” These paramilitaries, he said, would include military veterans and athletes capable of “break[ing] through any police cordon” to confront the Tbilisi Pride marchers this week – or, in Vasadze’s words, “the propagandists of perversion.”

Late in the address, Vasadze switched to fluent English – honed during his studies at Emory University – to address US President **Donald J. Trump**. He called on (<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/35909-georgian-businessman-levan-vasadze-addresses-us-president-donald-trump.html>) Trump to “drain the swamp at the US Embassy in Tbilisi,” which Vasadze believes is controlled by “Hillarists” (supporters of **Hillary Clinton**) and “globalist dogs” hell-bent on destroying Georgian culture.

But beyond the crude epithets, the English portion of Vasadze’s speech revealed a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of his audience. He did not issue threats of paramilitary attacks on gay pride parades in English. In fact, he assured Western listeners that “no one” in Georgia would “persecute, oppress, or beat people” because of their sexual orientation. Finally, Vasadze appealed to American conservatives to support him in upholding “religious freedom” and “free speech” in Georgia – values, he emphasized, that they share.

The contrast between his English- and Georgian-language remarks is telling. Similar discrepancies emerge when comparing his Georgian rhetoric to his Russian. He speaks the language at a native level, having made his fortune as an entrepreneur in post-Soviet Moscow. To Russian audiences, Vasadze enthusiastically endorses (<http://orthochristian.com/115716.html>) Dugin’s “Eurasianist” vision of Russian imperialism. But to his Georgian followers, Vasadze – dressed in traditional national costume, appears as a quintessential Georgian nationalist.

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Despite his lurid phrasing in all three languages, Vasadze is undeniably articulate and charismatic. He also has a stronger grasp of the nuances of American political culture than most Georgian politicians. Many of his points resonate with conservatives in the United States, who tend to oppose foreign meddling, support religious freedom, and promote traditional family values. And, as the organiser of the 2016 World Congress of Families (<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/06/01/world-congress-families-gathering-tbilisi-showcases-anti-lgbt-rhetoric-and-conspiracy>) in Tbilisi, Vasadze is trying to make inroads into this politically influential group. American conservatives – from former president **George W. Bush**, to the late Senator **John McCain**, to Vice President **Mike Pence** – stand out among the world's most prominent defenders of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, Vasadze's ability to reach this constituency is especially alarming.

In his address to Trump on 13 June, Vasadze voiced a familiar Kremlin demand: *Get the US out of Georgia*. Ordinarily, this would be dismissed outright. The Trump administration, like US policymakers from both parties, considers Georgia a strategic American ally and condemns Russian aggression and occupation. But Vasadze presented the Kremlin's demand in a sophisticated way, carefully calibrated to appeal to an influential subset of conservative Americans. At a time when Georgia is low on the list of policy priorities, and when few Americans have a nuanced understanding of the regional context, Vasadze's message could resonate beyond Tbilisi.

Consider **Pat Robertson**, one of America's most prominent Evangelical Christians. After Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Robertson condemned (<http://www.patrobertson.com/pressreleases/PatRobertsonRegardingGeorgia.asp>) Moscow's "vicious dismemberment of the tiny nation" and warned of an "unfolding sequence of Russian aggression." But in 2016, Robertson's CBN News channel featured an in-depth interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyYk1GotQYg>) in which Vasadze positioned himself as the guardian of Georgia's national identity – giving no indication of his pro-Kremlin agenda.

This shape-shifting is exactly what makes Vasadze so dangerous. Many of those who have not pored over his lengthy interviews, in three different languages, make the mistake of believing he is on their side. This group includes conservative Georgians, Russians, and Americans. Liberals, on the other hand, see him as a clown. And this is just as dangerous.

Georgians who hope to live in a modern European state – and their Western partners – should not discount Vasadze as a crackpot. Indeed, he represents an emerging threat to Georgia's stability and sovereignty that must be addressed before it's too late.

And that time may be coming soon.

Since taking power in 2012, the ruling Georgian Dream party has lost credibility both in the West and popularity at home. The government has made a string of blunders over the past year, from case-fixing to election-rigging, that has drawn public ire. With a crucial parliamentary election scheduled for next fall, Vasadze is preparing to fill the void.

The paramilitaries he describes could be instrumental in grassroots campaigning, especially in the rural areas Vasadze is likely counting on for support. On election day, these formations could be deployed to intimidate voters – just as Georgian Dream organised local criminal authorities at polling stations last November. Ultimately, these groups could foment widespread civil unrest, providing a convenient pretext for Moscow to intervene in Georgia.

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Ivanishvili, as the wealthiest person in the country and the puppet-master of the ruling party, still wields enormous power. Nevertheless, it is well within the realm of possibility that he will allow Vasadze to take the reins. A self-professed "non-politician," Ivanishvili has not held elected office in six years and largely avoids public life. Despite Ivanishvili's long-standing ties to Moscow, his government has attempted to walk the tightrope between Russia and the West. This status quo cannot hold.

With pressure from Washington to support a strategic deep-sea port project – which Russia vehemently opposes (<http://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/1553>) – Georgia's omnipotent oligarch can no longer pretend to play both sides. Ceding power to Vasadze peacefully, through an election, would enable Ivanishvili to placate Russia while maintaining a veneer of respectability in the West. But in a fiercely independent country where the wounds of 2008 have not healed, will people elect a leader so committed to imposing Russia's will on Georgia?

It's possible. The pro-Western opposition is divided and crippled by the exile of charismatic ex-president **Mikheil Saakashvili**. The ruling party, united only by hatred for Saakashvili, lacks any coherent principles or vision for Georgia's future.

Vasadze, by contrast, is speaking to deep-rooted issues of national identity to manipulate the public into thinking he has the nation's interests at heart. His emphasis on religion is to his political advantage: Year after year, surveys show that the most trusted institution in the country – by far – is the Georgian Orthodox Church. And this will not change anytime soon. Georgia is one of only two countries in the world (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/young-more-religious-than-old-in-only-two-countries-in-world>) where youth are, on average, more religious than people over age 40.

If he can successfully exploit Georgians' faith and dissatisfaction with the status quo to advance his Kremlin-friendly agenda, Vasadze will accomplish by 2020 what the Russian military failed to do in 2008: Returning this fiercely independent nation to Moscow's control. If we want to stop him, we must not underestimate him.

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion | Georgians are taking a stand against Vladimir Putin. Where is the West?

By Salome Samadashvili

July 12, 2019 at 1:28 p.m. EDT

Salome Samadashvili is a member of the Georgian Parliament for the opposition United National Movement.

In a recent interview, Vladimir Putin declared liberalism obsolete. Yet one tiny country in his neighborhood would beg to differ: Georgia. Nowhere else in the region do so many aspire to the Western-led, rules-based, liberal world order that Putin abhors.

On June 20, thousands took to the streets of Tbilisi to protest an address to the Georgian Parliament by Russian lawmaker Sergei Gavrillov, an open supporter of Moscow's efforts to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Young people and civic activists waving European Union, NATO and American flags condemned Russia's continuing occupation of parts of the country and its efforts to subvert our democracy. As I protested Gavrillov's appearance along with several other opposition members of Parliament, I was stunned by what happened next.

In response, Georgian authorities took a page from the Kremlin's playbook. Riot police dispersed the crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets. Officers were filmed aiming at protesters' faces, shooting them at point-blank range. A teenage girl and a journalist lost eyes. More than 200 people were hospitalized and dozens more arrested.

This brutality triggered a backlash of its own. Protests have continued every day for the past three weeks, demanding the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who ordered the violent crackdown. But the fundamental problem is larger than either Gavrillov or Gakharia. Though Putin has made no secret of his imperial ambitions, the greater threat to Georgia's western future lies within: The government has been adapting the Kremlin's tactics for domestic consumption. And Georgians have had enough.

Since 2012, the ruling Georgian Dream party has consolidated control over every state institution. Its shadowy financier — oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose fortune is equal to roughly a third of Georgia's GDP — is replicating Putin's system of rule. But in a country a hundred times smaller than Russia, the result looks more like state capture.

As the ruling party's popularity declines, the authorities are leveraging their immense power to stifle dissent. Last year's presidential election was a case study in democratic backsliding. Faced with a competitive runoff, the ruling party resorted to voter bribery, intimidation by police and criminal networks, and abuse of state resources. And just as in Putin's Russia, the Georgian ruling party has escalated attacks on civil society, the political opposition and independent media. Instead of responding to constructive criticism, officials too often attack the messenger — deriding, for example, the anti-corruption organization Transparency International as "accomplices of fascism."

Given ruling party officials' background, such parallels are predictable. Ivanishvili made his billions in Russia; he was once the largest individual shareholder of Kremlin-linked energy firm Gazprom. His top enforcer, Gakharia, was a Moscow businessman before entering Georgian politics at Ivanishvili's behest. In fact, he was granted Russian citizenship by Putin himself.

How have they managed to remain in power for seven years? Democratic deficits aside, Georgia's slide back toward the Kremlin's sphere of influence was gradual until June 20. But the sight of a Russian politician in the speaker of Parliament's seat challenged an idea that Georgians hold sacred: the idea of independent Georgia, part of Europe, whole and free.

In other words, Gavrilov's visit showed that Georgian Dream is trying to crush the actual dream of most Georgians: a democratic state, based on the rule of law, where European values prevail.

Now the temperature in the streets of Tbilisi is rising — and not thanks to summer. Radical pro-Russian religious groups, suspected to be backed by Ivanishvili, are threatening and attacking peaceful demonstrators. The government has all but abdicated its responsibility to ensure public safety: the Interior Ministry recently warned LGBTQ activists that police would not be able to defend a planned Pride parade from attacks by far-right paramilitaries. The use of violent proxies and controlled opposition movements to silence genuine pluralism is a hallmark of Putin's "managed democracy," and Ivanishvili is replicating it in Georgia.

There is no end in sight. Gakharia has refused to step down and has not been held accountable for the June 20 crackdown. Quite the opposite: In a style reminiscent of Soviet propaganda, the ruling party has blamed "radical elements in the opposition" for the violence and accused them of fomenting a coup. And now there are fresh signs that Ivanishvili is planning to target Rustavi 2, the most popular independent TV station in Georgia, for a hostile takeover.

If Ivanishvili succeeds in destroying democracy, it would be Putin's victory and Georgia's tragedy. Moreover, it would be a loss for American and European interests in the region. Time and again, the people of Georgia have chosen the West. Now the West must choose Georgia. It is time to remind Ivanishvili that the West stands with the Georgian people — and that this support will continue, with or without him.

Georgia's international partners must send a clear message. Ivanishvili must deliver on his promise to implement a fully proportional electoral system by next year, stop harassing critics from media, civil society, and the opposition, and publicly acknowledge that he is ready to relinquish power through free and fair elections — as did former president Mikheil Saakashvili in 2013.

Georgia's summer of discontent is an inflection point that should not be underestimated. There are two possible outcomes: another victory for Putin's illiberalism, or a chance to prove him wrong.

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Georgia's last hope



Young Georgians take part in pro-democracy protests in the centre of the South Caucasus nation's capital, Tbilisi.
EPA-EFE//GVANTSA AREVADZE

(<https://ecrparty.eu/>)

It's hard to imagine now, but Georgia was once an improbable success story. After the Rose Revolution in 2003, the small South Caucasus country made dramatic strides in dismantling the Soviet legacy of corruption and dependence. But in 2012, the democratic institutions built by reformist president **Mikheil Saakashvili** (<https://www.ourworld.co/the-day-georgian-democracy-died/>) became his undoing — his party lost the parliamentary elections to oligarch **Bidzina Ivanishvili**'s Georgian Dream coalition.

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To be sure, a peaceful transition of power through a free and fair election is no small achievement for a post-Soviet country. Many considered the 2012 election a major step forward for Georgia's democracy. Saakashvili's administration, after all, was not without its own mistakes.

But over the past seven years, Ivanishvili has subverted and eroded the very institutions that brought him to power. After securing the parliament and presidency for Georgian Dream, he left the prime minister's office for his glass palace overlooking Tbilisi, trading public accountability for limitless informal power. He then installed his loyalists to control the prosecutor's office, law enforcement agencies, state-owned enterprises, and almost every media outlet in the country.

Today, Georgia is a captured state (<https://voices.transparency.org/from-concentrated-power-to-state-capture-georgias-backsliding-anti-corruption-reforms-c94d76bb2b21>). The latest victim of Ivanishvili's neofeudalism is the Supreme Court, soon to be chaired by General Prosecutor **Shalva Tadumadze** (<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/17686/Authenticity-of-General-Prosecutor's-Diploma-Questioned>)— whose dubious diploma indicates he enrolled in an institute that did not exist at the time. Another judicial appointee drew derision during his confirmation hearing when he admitted he had never heard of the Magna Carta. What qualifies these men to be Supreme Court judges? Nothing except fealty to Ivanishvili; Tadumadze earlier served as the oligarch's personal lawyer.

Unsurprisingly, the judicial selection process has received negative (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/429572>) marks from the OSCE and local watchdog groups. Yet, in contrast to the adamantly pro-Western Saakashvili, Ivanishvili pays little heed to criticism from Georgia's international partners. Take last year's controversial presidential election (<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/inauguration-of-georgias-first-woman-president-is-not-a-sign-of-progress-but-a-troubling-step-back/>). International observers reported widespread vote-buying and intimidation, but their recommendations for improvement have gone largely ignored. Ivanishvili has no real incentive to ensure that the 2020 parliamentary election — a crucial opportunity to restore some semblance of democratic pluralism — is free or fair.

Since President **Salome Zurbishvili's** inauguration in December, Georgia's friends in the West (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/09/19/georgia-friends-west-are-suddenly-under-fire/>) have expressed growing alarm about the trajectory of the country. As democratic institutions have degraded, Russian influence in the government has grown. Ivanishvili is the main vector of this influence, followed by his loyal prime minister, **Giorgi Gakharia**. Both men have business interests in Russia, and they appear to be enacting the Kremlin's agenda in Georgia.

For illustration, take the beleaguered Anaklia deep-sea port project. In June, US Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo** emphasised (<https://jam-news.net/us-secretary-of-state-to-the-georgian-authorities/>) the importance of the project to the US-Georgian strategic partnership. Predictably, Russia's deputy foreign minister responded (<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/1553>) that Moscow would never accept a Georgian deep-water port on the Black Sea. A few weeks later, Ivanishvili's prosecutor brought dubious criminal charges against the project's most recognizable stakeholder, TBC Bank founder **Mamuka Khazaradze**. The US Embassy released a statement of concern (<https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-u-s-embassy-statement-on-charges-against-mamuka-khazaradze-and-badri-japaridze-july-25/>), implying the charges may be politically motivated and aimed at disrupting the Anaklia project. American investor Conti Group (<https://www.bm.ge/en/article/conti-group-is-leaving-anaklia-development-consortium/38522>) withdrew from the project shortly thereafter.

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While derailing initiatives essential to Georgia's Western trajectory, Ivanishvili and Gakharia have adopted the Kremlin's repressive tactics to silence domestic opposition. The most egregious example was on the night of June 20, when Gakharia, then interior minister, directed riot police to violently disperse a peaceful demonstration against the Russian occupation of Georgia's territory. Dozens of journalists and protesters were injured; several lost their eyes to resin bullets. Instead of resigning amid public outcry and condemnation (<http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=19893&lang=eng>) from human rights groups, Gakharia was promoted to the country's highest official position.

This status quo cannot hold. Georgians are, by and large, pro-Western; recent polling (<https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-july-2019-public-opinion-polls-georgia>) shows over 70% support for NATO and European integration. Nearly 90% call the United States a "friend" and Russia an "enemy." Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Georgian people have fought valiantly to break free of the Kremlin's sphere of influence. A decade ago, their sacrifices were paying off. But today, they are hostages of a puppet government serving "a constituency of one" (<https://civil.ge/archives/312394>).

Against this grim backdrop, there is still cause for optimism: Georgia's youth. This is no surprise considering the country's history. A generation ago, young people led movements for independence from the Soviet Union; when the Red Army crushed an anti-Soviet protest in 1989, many of those killed in the crackdown were teenage girls. Today, **Mako Gomuri** — a teenager who lost her eye (<https://www.rferl.org/a/my-eye-was-gone-georgian-teen-justice/30175215.html>) during Gakharia's dispersal of the June 20 anti-Russian-occupation protests — has emerged as a leader among young Georgians demanding justice and accountability from their government.

As Georgians struggle to free their country from the double-bind of oligarchic state capture and the Kremlin's aggression, Mako's generation is leading the charge. A number of self-organized youth movements have appeared over the past year, some seemingly inspired by the Kmara (<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr167.pdf>) ("Enough") movement that laid the groundwork for the Rose Revolution. Their potential should not be underestimated.

Today's young Georgians have advantages that their forebears could only dream of. As the first generation born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have only known an independent Georgia. They have internalized principles that are alien elsewhere in the region: their votes should count; media should be free to criticise the government; elected officials should serve the people, not a lone reclusive billionaire. And with social media, they are more connected than ever. The June 20 protests started with a Facebook event.

Like most Georgians, youth are largely disillusioned with the government and particularly with Ivanishvili. Moreover, they are sceptical of established political players. Their opinions of Saakashvili and his party, now Georgia's major opposition force, are varied and nuanced. Some view him as a hero who built a country from a failed state; others believe his government's actions fell short of his democratic ideals. Most agree that, if Ivanishvili's regime is to be peacefully dismantled, Saakashvili and his unwavering base of supporters must play a significant role.

Even among the portion of youth who do not support Saakashvili, the ex-president's legacy is undeniable. Young Georgians abhor Soviet-style corruption and nepotism; they have never paid a bribe in their lives. They learn English instead of Russian, wear T-shirts that proclaim "Russia is an occupant," dance to Georgian and Western DJs at Tbilisi's massive underground clubs, and protest when those clubs are raided by police (<https://gyla.ge/en/post/12-maisi-masshtaburi-sapolicio-operacia-tbilisi-klubebshi#sthash.BvOeEGsY.dpbs>). Unlike their grandparents, they are not nostalgic

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for cheap flights to Moscow. Their cultural icons are not the Soviet intelligentsia whom Ivanishvili sponsors, but Georgians who have made it big in the West: NBA player **Zaza Pachulia**, Balenciaga designer **Demna Gvasalia**, pianist **Khatia Buniatishvili**.

Indeed, Georgian youth often have a better grasp of Western values than their counterparts in the West. Not only do they overwhelmingly support EU and NATO membership and reject Russian neo-colonialism, but they can explain why. They take for granted the importance of protecting human rights, civil liberties, and democracy, ideals under threat worldwide. And they understand the Constitution protects *every* Georgian citizen: Thanks to initiatives like the 1+4 programme that were introduced in the Saakashvili era, youth from ethnic minority communities have more opportunity to integrate into mainstream Georgian society than their parents ever did.

Despite the failures of the Georgian government, there is still a Georgian state. And today, the young generation is its last hope.

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Ukraine's New President Prioritizes Campaign Promise to Change the Country



May 14, 2020 *Topic:* **Politics** *Region:* **Eurasia** *Tags:* **Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, Politics, Economy**

Volodymyr Zelensky is seizing a critical moment to push forward more boldly than ever on the reform agenda. And for Ukraine, that's long overdue.

by Christina Pushaw

W

hen Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky nominated Mikheil Saaka in his cabinet as vice prime minister for reform, pundits like Melinda Haring were quick to cry *deja vu*. True, this isn't the ex-president of Georgia's first rodeo in Ukraine. But there is reason to believe this one will turn out better than the last.

On one point, Haring is correct: Saakashvili's first venture into Ukrainian politics ended with disappointment. In 2015, then-president Petro Poroshenko appointed Saakashvili governor of Ukraine's Odessa region, citing his impressive track record as president of Georgia. But Poroshenko's move turned out to be more of a public relations ploy than a genuine step forward.

In Odessa, Saakashvili unveiled an ambitious agenda to cut over-regulation, rein in bureaucracy, and eradicate the graft that had long sapped Ukraine's biggest port of its economic potential. In challenging the status quo, Saakashvili provoked the ire of powerful vested interests—local authorities who relied on the corrupt system for survival. Frustrated by the lack of support from Kiev, Saakashvili resigned and went into opposition.

His popularity became a threat to Poroshenko, whose rating had dwindled to single digits while reforms stalled. Poroshenko soon revoked Saakashvili's citizenship and forced him into exile. Last year, after beating Poroshenko in a landslide to win the presidency, Zelensky returned Saakashvili's Ukrainian passport. The move prompted speculation that Zelensky, elected with a mandate to push forward where his predecessor had failed, would offer Saakashvili a position in his government. But for the first year of Zelensky's presidency, no offer came.

So why now? There are two likely explanations.

First, amid the coronavirus pandemic, Ukraine—like the rest of the world—faces an economic crisis of stunning magnitude. GDP is expected to contract by 7.7 percent this year; unemployment has already skyrocketed. Navigating this upheaval demands

decisive and bold action. And even Saakashvili's harshest critics admit he's nothing if not decisive and bold.

In crisis, Saakashvili sees an opportunity for Ukraine: The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has signaled willingness to boost support for the country's economic recovery. But a favorable IMF deal—and the billions in public and private investment that the IMF's seal of approval would unlock—can only be realized if Ukraine makes real progress on its reform agenda.

Enter Saakashvili. Zelensky sees a leading role for the Columbia-educated ex-president in negotiations with Ukraine's international creditors. It's not hard to understand why—during Saakashvili's presidency, foreign investment in Georgia ballooned and GDP quadrupled. This transformation of Georgia was made possible by constructive cooperation with international financial institutions.

Ukraine sorely needs the same miracle. Saakashvili has already called on the IMF to double the \$4 billion tentatively offered to aid Ukraine this year—and he can make the case that Ukraine requires more support to rebuild its pandemic-hit economy. International investors have welcomed the news of Saakashvili's appointment; the president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine expressed hope Saakashvili would “shake things up” and “boost economic growth.” Ukraine expert Anders Aslund echoed this sentiment.

In other words, Haring's claim that Zelensky overestimates Saakashvili's reputation in the West appears to be unfounded.

Second, in appointing Saakashvili, Zelensky shores up support from his voter base. Zelensky's victory was at its core a rebuke of the establishment. Ukrainians were so fed up with the political class that, last year, 73 percent voted for an actor whose only prior brush with politics was playing the president in a TV satire. Saakashvili has experience, but his zero-tolerance approach to corruption appeals to the same anti-establishment sentiments. He often appears in Ukrainian and international media to

support the president. Recently, polling firm Ipsos asked voters who would be the most effective prime minister, and Saakashvili led the pack.

Judging by his enemies, Saakashvili generally earns high marks. His appointment has drawn ire from the region's most regressive forces. Russian state television wasted no time attacking Zelensky for inviting a "war criminal" into his government. In Ukraine, the pro-Kremlin Opposition Bloc has vowed to oppose Saakashvili's nomination. But the biggest temper tantrum arose from Saakashvili's homeland, now ruled informally by Bidzina Ivanishvili, an oligarch who made his fortune in Russia. In response to Zelensky's decision, Georgia threatened to recall its ambassador from Kiev.

In short, Zelensky's choice makes sense. Haring's response does not.

Haring's prediction that Saakashvili will fall out with Zelensky, as he did with Poroshenko, overlooks the key difference between Zelensky and his predecessor. Poroshenko was an oligarch first, a president second. Ultimately, he lacked the political will to transform a system that had benefited him to the tune of billions.

And in claiming Saakashvili will fail to reform Ukraine because he failed to reform Odessa, Haring contradicts herself. She later points out that Saakashvili's efforts were blocked by Odessa mayor Gennady Trukhanov—an erstwhile ally of Poroshenko. The president ensured Trukhanov remained in office despite his embezzlement charges, evident ties to organized crime, and documented corruption schemes. Yet Saakashvili was the failure?

If he had enjoyed support instead of resistance from Kiev, then perhaps Odessa could have been another of his success stories.

Saakashvili's turbulent history in Ukraine gives Zelensky the benefit of hindsight. The president knows Saakashvili will not allow himself to be used in a facade of half-hearted reform attempts. On the contrary, Zelensky's decision has reaffirmed his commitment to real change. In appointing Saakashvili, Zelensky is seizing a critical moment to push forward more boldly than ever on the reform agenda.

And for Ukraine, that's long overdue.

Christina Pushaw holds a MA in European & Eurasian Studies from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She has served as an advisor to politicians in Eastern Europe, including Mikheil Saakashvili. She is based in Tbilisi, Georgia and Washington, DC.

Image: Reuters

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UkraineAlert May 15, 2020

Why I'm optimistic Georgia's reforms can change Ukraine

By Mikheil Saakashvili



“Ukraine isn’t Georgia, so why does the ex-president of Georgia think he can use the same recipe to reform Ukraine?”

Experts from Washington to Kyiv have been asking this question since 2015, when I first entered Ukrainian politics after two terms as president of Georgia. Now that President Zelenskyy has appointed me to head Ukraine’s National Reform Council, the time has come to address this question. The results of my initiatives in the coming months should deliver a definitive and final answer. But as I start this new job, I have a few good reasons for optimism.

Let’s begin with Zelenskyy’s rationale for nominating me: He knows what happened in Georgia during my presidency. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and a disastrous civil war, Georgia was a failed state. Institutions were all but nonexistent. The social safety net didn’t function; law enforcement was the purview of criminal gangs. Before 2004, Georgia was one of the world’s most corrupt countries, as Ukraine is today. However, unlike most of Georgia when I was first elected, Ukraine at least has electricity.

During my presidency, Georgia’s GDP quadrupled. Foreign investment skyrocketed. The proportion of people living in poverty dropped from 55 percent in 2001, to less than half of that figure by 2012. And for the first time, Georgia began producing and exporting high-tech military equipment.

The reform-driven economic boom enabled us to increase pensions twelve-fold and raise the salaries of teachers, police, and other essential state employees, attracting talented new blood to a public sector that had once been a hotbed of corruption and incompetence.

There is no need to take my word for it. The World Bank ranked Georgia as the world’s top reformer during my presidency, claiming that “Georgia’s experience shows the vicious cycle of ostensibly endemic corruption can be broken.”

It is true that Ukraine is not Georgia. But that’s no reason for pessimism – quite the opposite, in fact. When I took office, Georgia was in a worse situation than Ukraine is now. As the largest country in Europe, ten times the size of Georgia, Ukraine has far greater economic potential.

At the end of my presidency, the GDP per capita in Georgia was 15 percent higher than in Ukraine. Imagine what those numbers would be if Ukraine could cast off the shackles of the Soviet legacy, as Georgia did. There is no reason why Ukraine cannot become at least as prosperous as neighboring Poland over the next decade.

Skeptics point out that Ukraine’s vast resources, entrenched political class, and powerful vested interests are greater obstacles to reform than we ever faced in Georgia. There is some merit to this argument. Oligarchs control Ukraine’s economy and they will not give up without a fight. I learned that the hard way, when my efforts as governor of Odesa region were blocked by Zelenskyy’s oligarch predecessor and his cronies.

But, as in Georgia before, much of Ukraine’s economic and political dysfunction stems from the Soviet legacy. When sprawling bureaucracy and regulatory regimes are eliminated, so are opportunities for graft. Corrupt officials, criminal authorities, and their lackeys in the civil service are all starved of illicit income. In this way, patronage networks that have persisted since Soviet times finally collapse.

To be clear, I have never suggested that Ukraine simply “copy and paste” exactly the same policies that succeeded in Georgia. Reform priorities and processes must be adapted to the local context. But the experience of Georgia, as a fellow Soviet successor state that overcame many of the problems that cripple Ukraine today, is undeniably instructive.

Thu, May 28, 2020 • 10:30 am ET

Mikheil Saakashvili: One last chance to change Ukraine?

As former Georgian president and Odesa governor Mikheil Saakashvili returns to Ukraine’s political scene with his recent appointment as the executive secretary of Ukraine’s National Reform Council, his past work and future plans have created an air of expectation and uncertainty in Kyiv.



- Democratic Transitions
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As president of Georgia, I had a mandate to remake the system. Admittedly, I do not have the same authority in Ukraine. But sustainable reform in any country is a team effort, not a one-man show. I wouldn’t have accepted this challenge if I wasn’t confident that Zelenskyy was up to the task.

By appointing me, Zelenskyy has demonstrated a key trait of all successful reformers – a willingness to make bold moves, even if that means angering the establishment. My nomination drew the ire of many who benefit from the status quo, including members of the president’s own party. Nevertheless, he stood his ground.

Today, the stakes could not be higher. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine is on the verge of an economic crisis of stunning magnitude. GDP is expected to contract by at least seven percent this year. Unemployment has skyrocketed, and 45 million people face an uncertain future as Russia’s hybrid war drags on.

But if I learned one thing as president of Georgia, it is that moments of crisis can hold unexpected opportunities. During my presidency, Russia invaded and occupied a fifth of Georgian territory. The global financial meltdown hit at the same time. But with decisive leadership and support from the West, Georgia not only survived but thrived, becoming more independent from the Kremlin’s kleptocracy.

In desperate times like these, people want real change, and they want it now. Zelenskyy understands this. The coming months will test his leadership, as well as my own. If Ukraine becomes a prosperous European state, Georgia and the rest

The Georgian recipe must work to transform Ukraine because failure is not an option.

Mikheil Saakashvili is the Chairman of the Ukrainian National Reform Council and the former president of Georgia.

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By Peter Dickinson

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Image: Mikheil Saakashvili pictured following his appointment to lead Ukraine's National Reform Council. May 8, 2020. REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko

ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

I Abolished and Rebuilt the Police. The United States Can Do the Same.

The former president of Georgia explains how to restore public trust and beat corruption.

By Mikheil Saakashvili

JUNE 11, 2020, 2:45 PM

After Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2004, I became president of a failed state. Law enforcement agencies functioned like criminal gangs. Officers demanded bribes, trafficked narcotics and weapons, and worked for political and business elites as a mercenary security force. Georgia was a textbook example of "predatory policing": Police did not perform the basic responsibilities of ensuring public safety, instead enriching themselves and their patrons by extorting citizens. A 2003 survey found that just 2.3 percent of Georgians held a positive view of police. In just a few years, we transformed this—offering a model for other countries, such as the United States, struggling with police reform.

The corruption of law enforcement empowered organized criminals, known in the former Soviet Union as *vory v zakone*, literally "thieves in law," to fill the void. Gang leaders served not only as de facto police but also as judge, jury, and executioner. The police themselves were notorious for collaborating with organized crime. Suspicion of state institutions was deeply rooted in Georgian society: A survey of schoolchildren in 1993 found that a quarter of them wanted to be thieves in law when they grew up. Those youth had witnessed police systematically exploiting their communities. Of course, they held gangsters in higher regard than law enforcement.

Given that reality, police reform was not only a matter of restructuring institutions or implementing better policies. We had to change the mentality of a broken, cynical, and fearful society. Before people could begin to trust the police, we—the new political elites—had to earn their trust. Challenging the status quo was not enough. We had to destroy it and build something better.

And we had to do it quickly. After the Rose Revolution, Georgian society united to demand reform. Reforms mean nothing without results that people can see.



American Investment in Georgia: "Dreams" vs. Reality By Christina Pushaw

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Christina Pushaw is the director of the Georgian-American nonprofit organization New Leaders Initiative, which promotes youth engagement in politics and civil society. She has a Master's in International Relations & Economics from Johns Hopkins University SAIS.

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ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Mikheil Saakashvili: Why I'm a 'Troublemaker' in Georgia and Ukraine

A response to Brian McNicoll's Sept. 14 article in The American Spectator.

by MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI

September 16, 2020, 11:38 PM



Mikheil Saakashvili, Oct. 17, 2012 (European People's Party/Wikimedia Commons)



f all the epithets my critics have called me during my nine years as president of Georgia and six years in Ukrainian politics, my favorite is “troublemaker.” For this honorific, I have to thank Brian McNicoll, whose September 14 [article in *The American Spectator*](#) lambasted me for causing “mischief” in the former Soviet

space. But he fails to answer the main question: For whom am I making trouble? So I will answer it myself.

Throughout the world, those who benefit from the status quo will always fight to preserve it. Eastern Europe is no exception. We are still struggling to cast off the Soviet legacy of corruption and kleptocracy — indeed, my region has a deeper swamp than Washington, D.C. And that's exactly whom my reformist agenda caused "trouble" for. When I assumed office after the peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003, I immediately started to "drain the swamp" of inept communist bureaucrats and replaced them through meritocratic competition. We fired and rebuilt the entire police force from the ground up, annihilated the widespread practice of bribery for diplomas, and enacted some of the world's most business-friendly tax and regulatory reforms.

These bold actions soon paid off. Georgia emerged as a global success story, recognized as the "top reformer" several years in a row by the World Bank. Foreign investment skyrocketed; GDP grew fourfold. No need to take my word for it: Donald Trump himself visited Georgia during my presidency, and he was so impressed with our progress that he called me "one of the great leaders of the world" on *Fox & Friends* in 2012.

Though Georgia benefited enormously from my reforms, vested interests lost ground. Before my presidency, the country had been ruled by an unholy alliance of venal Soviet bureaucrats and organized crime kingpins. I was a "troublemaker" for these types: I removed them from power and put criminals in jail. Predictably, this triggered backlash from everyone who had profited from the old, corrupt system. I was called a "dictator" for enforcing the law equally.

But the results of my reforms speak for themselves. In fact, that's why I was invited by the Ukrainian government to share my experience with Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution in 2014. And that's why President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed me to chair Ukraine's National Reforms Council earlier this year. Like Georgia, Ukraine is a post-Soviet country with a swamp that needs to be drained. And I'm not the first to suggest that Ukraine can learn from Georgia's recent history.

As aspiring NATO members in Eastern Europe, both Georgia and Ukraine have borne the brunt of Russia's aggression. Another person who considers me a troublemaker is Vladimir Putin, and I am extremely proud of this. McNicoll accuses me of starting a war against Russia in 2008. In reality, Putin could not stand the fact that a former Soviet state in "Russia's backyard" was making such swift progress toward prosperity and democracy — under the leadership of an uncompromisingly pro-Western president.

Most people who doubted that Russia would launch an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country have since changed their minds in light of the Ukraine crisis. Once might be an anomaly, but twice is a pattern. If this does not convince McNicoll that Russia was the aggressor in Georgia, he should recall that the entire armed conflict took place on Georgia's sovereign territory, within borders recognized by the United States. It is a well-known fact that Russian tanks were advancing from the breakaway region of South Ossetia to our capital, Tbilisi. I cannot imagine a more clear-cut example of self-defense.

While Georgia was fighting for survival against a nuclear power a hundred times larger than us, Sen. John McCain stepped up to defend us. He stood to gain nothing from his support for Georgia, a tiny, resource-poor, and obscure country on the other side of the world. He stood for his ideals alone. For this, I will always defend McCain and my long friendship with him. Of course, I did not agree with him on everything, and I avoid involvement in American internal political affairs. But I, and the Georgian people, never forget loyal friends like McCain.

Today, Georgia again looks to the U.S. for hope. The vestiges of the post-Soviet swamp have returned to power in the eight years since I left office. The country is now ruled informally by an oligarch who made his fortune in Russia: Bidzina Ivanishvili. (Because McNicoll showed such interest in my lobbyist, I should note that the executive director of the Clinton Foundation worked as Ivanishvili's lobbyist to help him defeat me in the 2012 election.) Again, don't take my word for it — the Republican Study Committee's strategy document, as well as individual congressmen, openly refer to Ivanishvili as a "Russian oligarch."

Fortunately, there is room for optimism. Only 17 percent of Georgians intend to vote for Ivanishvili's party in the parliamentary election on October 31. Georgia will soon have another opportunity to drain the swamp and get back on track to reform. I'm ready to play my role in this, but I hope it's the last time my "troublemaking" is needed.

Mikheil Saakashvili is the head of the National Reforms Council of Ukraine and the former president of Georgia.



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And that's a problem. Dabbling in Ukrainian politics will only lead to a confrontation with Russia. The Ukraine ain't our problem! Being tied to them through a relic of the cold war i.e. NATO is not a smart idea.

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MEMORANDUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S.-Georgia partnership is crucial to U.S. strategic interests, which fully coincide with the interests of the Georgian people. Despite the ruling party's conciliatory approach to Russia and troubling attempts to silence opposition, the Georgian people remain steadfastly committed to democratic development and closer ties with the West. **The presidential election on October 28 will determine whether Georgia remains a crucial U.S. ally in a difficult region or succumbs fully to Moscow's influence.**

The pre-election environment in Georgia is volatile. Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, is the most powerful man in the country. The oligarch, who made his fortune in Russia as the largest individual shareholder of Gazprom, holds no official position and is unaccountable to the public. Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's once-promising democracy resembles Russia's power vertical under Vladimir Putin. Business, media, and civil society face undue pressure from the government. **The politicized justice system facilitates state capture.**

- Civil society activists report intimidation and harassment from Georgian Dream officials.
- The government is spreading disinformation and putting undue pressure on independent media in the run-up to the election. **Iberia TV, a channel that has criticized the government, was shut down on October 16, 2018.**
- American investors in Georgia have reported unfair treatment by the government, while investment from Russia, China, and Iran has increased. **Philip Morris** was targeted by the Georgian courts as part of a corruption scheme to capture the tobacco industry for Georgian Dream officials.

The ruling party's presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, is correctly perceived by the electorate as pro-Russian. By pushing the Kremlin's narrative, Zurbishvili dangerously undermines Georgian and U.S. security interests—which are incompatible with Russia's aspirations to establish an exclusive sphere of influence in Georgia.

- Zurbishvili has blamed the Georgian side for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War—and suggested that the U.S. shares responsibility for the conflict by supporting the Georgian government.
- The overwhelming majority of Georgians support NATO membership, but Zurbishvili has stated that she is not interested in pursuing this goal, a key foreign policy priority for Georgia since the early 2000s.
- Zurbishvili has claimed that George Soros orchestrated the Rose Revolution—a discredited conspiracy theory promoted in Russian state media.

Days before the election, Zurbishvili is failing to garner anywhere near the level of popular support enjoyed by other Georgian Dream-backed candidates since 2012. Her unpopularity is energizing the opposition and pro-Western swing voters. The "Strength in Unity" coalition, led by Grigol Vashadze—who served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs under Saakashvili—is leading in the polls. The ruling party is resorting to voter suppression and may commit outright electoral fraud to marginalize Vashadze and install Zurbishvili. **Due to a new Ministry of Defense policy, up to 90% of Georgian service-members on military bases will be deprived of the right to choose their commander-in-chief.**

A victory for Vashadze and the pro-Western opposition would bolster Georgians' trust in the electoral system, strengthen democratic institutions, and secure U.S. interests in Georgia. If Zurbishvili is declared the winner, the majority of Georgian voters would consider the result illegitimate. Extreme civil unrest would follow—and there is a chance this would provide a pretext for Russian intervention in Georgia. **U.S. officials must send a strong message emphasizing the importance of a peaceful transition of power following a free and fair presidential election.**

BACKGROUND

Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in a pro-Western government led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, the Kremlin has demonstrated increasing aggression in its attempts to bring Georgia back under Russian control. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and occupies 20% of Georgian territory to this day. Beyond conventional warfare, the Russian government has also targeted Georgia with cyber-attacks, information operations, and other hybrid tactics to establish an exclusive sphere of influence over the Caucasus region.

The Kremlin also funds political parties, fringe social movements, non-governmental organizations, and media outlets to bolster Russian soft power in Georgia. Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay off in October 2012, when the Georgian Dream coalition led by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili won the parliamentary elections, driving Saakashvili's pro-Western party into opposition.

Georgia's westward trajectory has faltered since Georgian Dream came to power. In February 2018, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats issued the DNI's *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, which highlighted serious concerns with Georgian Dream's propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and causing internal problems as Georgia continues to face external threats from Russia. High-level corruption, increased crime, economic stagnation, and a politicized justice system contribute to widespread popular discontent. Mass protests in June 2018 prompted the resignation of the prime minister.

Nevertheless, the Georgian people remain steadfastly committed to democratic development and closer ties with the West. But in failing to decisively secure U.S. interests in Georgia, the U.S. cedes the region to Russian control. **Georgia is at a critical crossroads, and U.S. interests in the region face an unprecedented threat.**

PRESSURE ON BUSINESS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

On October 16, 2018, Transparency International released a statement expressing alarm at "recent indications of increased state capture in Georgia and verbal attacks on civil society by prominent members of government." Examples of the ruling party's undue pressure on business and civil society include:

- **Civil society activists and media organizations that criticize the government report intimidation and harassment from Georgian Dream officials, ranging from verbal attacks to false imprisonment (selective justice).**
 - The Executive Secretary of Georgian Dream and Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze publicly derided the leaders of civil society organizations including Transparency International as "fascists."
 - A coalition of influential non-governmental organizations, including major election observers, responded with a statement criticizing high-level corruption and informal governance in Georgia.
 - From the NGO coalition statement on October 10, 2018: "The country is in the pre-election mode, which, in turn, makes the public more polarized and increases the risks of using issues for political manipulation. In these conditions, it is critically important that the work of the organizations observing the election environment is not hampered and that their activities are protected from groundless and purposeful discrediting by all political groups."
- **American investors in Georgia have reported unfair treatment by the government, while investment from Russia, China, and Iran has increased.**
 - Leaked recordings in September 2018 shed light on a corruption scheme to manipulate the tobacco market in Georgia, so that proceeds of tobacco sales benefit the Georgian Dream party apparatus and its high-ranking officials.
 - International firms with major investments in Georgia, including U.S. company Philip Morris and British American Tobacco, were court-ordered to pay exorbitant fines to Georgian tobacco companies connected to ruling party officials. (*Transparency International*, 10/03/2018)
 - "Recently publicized secret audio recordings suggest that Georgia is afflicted by high-level corruption... High-level government officials and the ruling Georgian Dream party appear to have benefited from the arrangement. What is more, the representatives of the judiciary have also allegedly played a part."
 - On June 22, 2018, U.S. Representative Pete Sessions (R-TX) criticized the Georgian Dream government in the Congressional record for "aggressive and discouraging actions toward American companies operating in Georgia." Sessions expressed concern with reports of "favorable outreach to companies from Iran, China, and Russia." (Some Georgian firms are reportedly repackaging goods to circumvent Western sanctions on Iran.)

GEORGIAN DREAM / SALOME ZURABISHVILI

The Georgian Dream-endorsed presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, is widely—and correctly—perceived as pro-Russian. She has pushed the Kremlin's narrative for over a decade, against Georgian and U.S. security interests.

Zurbishvili on the 2008 Russian-Georgian War:

Most concerning, Zurbishvili has blamed the Georgian side for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, and in doing so, has suggested that the U.S. shares responsibility for the conflict by supporting the Georgian government. In her words:

- "The main purpose of Georgia's conflict with Russia is to strengthen the loyalty of Georgia to the U.S. and U.K., and to guarantee that they will have control over the South Caucasus." (*Agence France-Presse*, 08/08/2008)

- “If there were any mistakes made by the Georgian leadership, [the Americans] will share this responsibility since they were very close to the Georgian leadership.” (*I’Obs*, 08/25/2008)
 - Vladimir Putin referred to Zurabishvili’s remarks to justify Russia’s invasion and ongoing occupation of South Ossetia (*CNN*, 08/28/2008 and *Le Figaro*, 09/13/2008)
 - Echoing the Kremlin’s narrative, Zurabishvili has consistently blamed then-President Mikheil Saakashvili’s actions—and those of the U.S. in support of Georgia’s national security and territorial integrity—for starting the Russian-Georgian War.
 - Zurabishvili has accused Saakashvili and the Georgian military of committing “war crimes” in 2008. In the context of ongoing cases in the Hague, Zurabishvili’s presidency would pave the way for the international community to place the blame on the Georgian side for the 2008 war—potentially leading to criminal indictments for Georgian officers.

Zurabishvili on NATO and the Rose Revolution:

Zurabishvili’s comments align with the Kremlin’s narrative on other issues of crucial importance to Georgian and U.S. national interests. According to a June 2018 NDI poll, 75% of Georgians support NATO membership—but Zurabishvili has publicly stated that she is not interested in pursuing this goal, which has been a key foreign policy priority for Georgia since the early 2000s. Russian President Vladimir Putin has long held that Georgia’s accession to NATO is “unacceptable” for the Kremlin. Zurabishvili has claimed that American philanthropist George Soros orchestrated the Rose Revolution—a discredited Kremlin conspiracy theory.

- “The Soros NGO apparatus ran and financed the Rose Revolution.” (*Herodote*, April 2008)
- “Georgia cannot join NATO, and this is not a tragedy for me.” (Georgian TV interview, 2016)
- At a campaign speech in the Georgian region of Akhalkalaki, where there is a sizeable Armenian population, Zurabishvili called for these Georgian citizens to have dual Russian-Georgian citizenship.
 - Zurabishvili’s approach to the Armenian ethnic minority supports Russia’s strategy of exacerbating divisions among minorities in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe.
 - At the same event, Zurabishvili denounced Saakashvili’s party for constructive cooperation with Georgia’s neighbor, Turkey, a NATO ally.

ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

Given the overwhelming pro-American, anti-Russian sentiment among the Georgian people, Zurabishvili’s stated views make her a highly controversial candidate. With days left until the October 28 presidential election, Zurabishvili is failing to garner anywhere near the level of popular support enjoyed by other Georgian Dream-backed candidates since 2012. Zurabishvili’s unpopularity is energizing and consolidating a historically fractured opposition and driving pro-Western swing voters, even those who had earlier opposed Saakashvili, to vote *against* Georgian Dream.

Several opposition groups—including United National Movement, the former ruling party affiliated with Saakashvili—have come together under the “Strength in Unity” coalition, led by presidential candidate Grigol (Gregory) Vashadze. Vashadze, who served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs during Saakashvili’s second term as president (2008-2012), is the only opposition candidate who is in a position to win the election.

- According to the most recent polling (Edison Research, 9/28-10/4), among likely voters, Vashadze leads a crowded field of candidates with 31% support to Zurabishvili’s 15%.
- If no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote on October 28, a second-round election will be held with the top two vote-getters—likely to be Vashadze and Zurabishvili.
 - Most of the other opposition candidates (e.g., David Bakradze, Shalva Natelashvili) would pledge support to Vashadze in a hypothetical runoff election.
 - The Edison poll projects that Vashadze would win 59% to Zurabishvili’s 20% in a two-way contest.

Ivanshvili, Georgian Dream, and the Kremlin are working to marginalize Vashadze due to his pro-Western platform and association with Saakashvili. Their overarching objective is to ensure that Saakashvili will never return to Georgia because of Saakashvili’s consistent opposition to Putin, who continues to denounce him publicly.

- Perennial pro-Russian candidates who receive financing from Moscow, including Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement-United Georgia) and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), are not participating in the presidential election.

- Burjanadze and APG's election boycotts were directed by Moscow to boost Ivanishvili's candidate. The combined support of openly pro-Russian/Kremlin-backed parties, about 6-7% of the electorate, will benefit Zurabishvili.

VOTER SUPPRESSION AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT

As Vashadze opens up a wider lead over Zurabishvili in the polls, the ruling Georgian Dream party is likely to use the administrative apparatus, voter suppression, or outright electoral fraud to falsify the election results and install their Kremlin-friendly candidate. Though robust local and international monitoring efforts are planned, civil society organizations and voters report that Georgian Dream is already engaging in voter suppression and vote-buying.

- **Up to 90% of Georgian service-members on military bases will be prevented from participating in the election, depriving them of the right to choose their commander-in-chief.**
 - The Georgian Ministry of Defense has announced that polling stations will not be available on bases. There is no option to vote by mail/absentee in Georgia.
 - Active-duty service-members will be required to travel to their home precincts to vote, requiring permission from their commanding officers to take leave. Even if permission is granted, service-members face an undue burden of traveling hundreds of miles in one day to vote. This policy constitutes de-facto disenfranchisement; the ruling party is aware that Zurabishvili is especially unpopular with the military.
 - Suppression of military voting is especially concerning, given that Zurabishvili has blamed the Georgian military for starting the 2008 war, and her presidency could have serious repercussions for ongoing international court cases at The Hague. Zurabishvili's election would give ammunition to the Russian side, which has accused Georgia of "war crimes" in the 2008 conflict (see above).
- **Georgian citizens living abroad have also reported disenfranchisement.** About 850,000 Georgians have emigrated since 2012, many of whom supported Saakashvili's party and plan to vote for Vashadze in this election.
 - On October 3-6, 2018, a Georgian citizen living in Switzerland attempted to register to vote online, and after several "technical errors," she reported to the Georgian consulate in Bern to register in person. She was told that the consular officials were "on holiday" and was unable to register to vote. She claims that she was blocked from registering because of her support for Vashadze.
 - In New York City, home to a large population of opposition-friendly Georgian emigrants and political asylees, eligible voters reported "technical errors" when attempting to register online between October 1-7, 2018. These errors were sporadic in nature.
 - Georgian service-members at NATO missions in Iraq and Afghanistan will be disenfranchised by the Ministry of Defense policy (above).
 - There are no comprehensive election-monitoring efforts planned at Georgian consulates around the world.
- **Georgian citizens have reported that fake identities are registered to vote**, with some households reporting six or seven unfamiliar names registered at their home addresses via the Central Election Commission.

DISINFORMATION AND THE MEDIA

Television and other traditional news outlets connected to Georgian Dream officials are targeting voters with disinformation and propaganda to influence the results of the elections. According to NDI polling, 68% of Georgians believe that Georgian television stations spread disinformation. The government is likewise putting undue pressure on media in the run-up to the election.

- Zaza Okuashvili, owner of the independent TV station "Iberia TV," claimed in September 2018 that the Georgian courts treated his media company unfairly, levying exorbitant fines after he refused to participate in a Georgian Dream-linked corruption scheme. **As a result, Iberia TV was shut down due to "financial problems" on October 16, 2018.**
- Okuashvili released bank statements, receipts and recordings as evidence after accusing Ivanishvili of extortion.
- Iberia TV journalists also report that Georgian Dream officials attempted to install a party member as the chairman of the media outlet because Ivanishvili was unhappy with criticism from the channel.
- The pro-government TV channel "Imedi" suspended its regular political satire show after the anchor, comedian Vasiko Odishvili, mocked Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze, an unpopular Georgian Dream official.

Internet "troll farms," similar to those used by Russian intelligence services, are also deployed to attack the opposition and boost the ruling party on social media through disinformation efforts. Whether or not the ruling party is directly collaborating with the Russian

government, it is clear that Georgian Dream is using the Kremlin's tactics to sway the electorate in favor of the pro-Russian candidate, Zurabishvili.

POTENTIAL ELECTORAL FRAUD

If these attempts at voter suppression and manipulation fail, on Election Day, the ruling party may resort to difficult-to-detect methods of electoral fraud. Some tactics that observers should be on alert for include:

- **Carousel voting:** The ruling party coordinates voters to be transported to different polling stations and cast multiple votes.
- **Network marketing:** Georgian Dream "precinct captains" demand a certain number of votes from each household, verified by voters' cell-phone photos of their ballots. The ruling party uses **administrative resources** to apply pressure to voters, because more than half of Georgia's work-force are public-sector employees.
- Georgian NGOs have expressed concerns about voters being given **pre-filled ballots** with the Georgian Dream candidate's name. "Precinct captains" affiliated with the ruling party ask voters to take cell-phone photos of their ballots to verify their vote. (In Georgian, this practice is referred to as "Armenian carousel," not to be confused with carousel voting.)
- Independent media outlets and civil society groups have reported that the government is planning **electricity cuts** on Election Day to manipulate the vote counts.
 - On October 12, 2018, the chairman of a polling station in Gori (a Georgian Dream member) told Radio Mosaic anonymously that he was "disgusted" by the ruling party's plan for Election Day.
 - He claimed that electricity will be cut for ten minutes on the night of October 28, giving Georgian Dream members a window of opportunity for ballot-stuffing.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

International observers and U.S. government officials must stress the importance of a free and fair presidential election.

- The integrity of this election must be evaluated in a holistic manner, including reports from the polls as well as reports on disinformation in the media, government criticism of civil society, and targeted disenfranchisement in the weeks leading up to the election.
- The international community must consider reports from Georgian civil society and the electorate about voter suppression, rather than focusing exclusively on fraud at polling stations on Election Day.

A victory for Vashadze, the pro-Western opposition candidate, in a free and fair election would bolster Georgians' trust in the electoral system and strengthen democratic institutions in Georgia. At the same time, this outcome would secure U.S. interests in Georgia by dealing a devastating blow to the Kremlin's designs on the region.

If Zurabishvili is declared the winner, the majority of Georgian voters would consider the result illegitimate. Extreme civil unrest would follow—and there is a chance this would provide a pretext for Russian intervention in Georgia. **The surest way to avoid this worst-case scenario would be for a U.S. official to send a strong message emphasizing the importance of a peaceful transition of power following a free and fair presidential election.**

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 25, 2018

SUBJECT: Presidential Election in Georgia – October 28

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S.-Georgia partnership is crucial to U.S. strategic interests, which fully coincide with the interests of the Georgian people. Despite the ruling party's conciliatory approach to Russia and troubling attempts to silence opposition, the Georgian people remain steadfastly committed to democratic development and closer ties with the West. The presidential election on October 28 will determine whether Georgia remains a dependable U.S. ally in a difficult region or succumbs fully to Russian influence.

The pre-election environment in Georgia is volatile. Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, is the most powerful man in the country. The oligarch, who made his fortune in Russia as the largest individual shareholder of Gazprom, holds no official position and is unaccountable to the public. Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's once-promising democracy resembles

Russia's power vertical under Vladimir Putin. Business, media, and civil society face undue pressure from the government. The politicized justice system facilitates state capture: American investors in Georgia, including Philip Morris International Inc., have reported unfair treatment by the courts.

The ruling party's presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, is correctly perceived by the electorate as pro-Russian. By pushing the Kremlin's narrative, Zurbishvili dangerously undermines Georgian and U.S. security interests—which are incompatible with Russia's aspiration to establish an exclusive sphere of influence in Georgia.

- Zurbishvili has blamed the Georgian side for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War and suggested that the U.S. shares responsibility for the conflict by supporting the Georgian government. Putin has used Zurbishvili's remarks to defend Russia's invasion and occupation of Georgia and to delegitimize U.S. engagement.
- The overwhelming majority of Georgians support NATO membership, but Zurbishvili has stated that she is not interested in pursuing NATO integration—a key foreign policy priority for Georgia since the early 2000s.
- Due to her controversial views, Zurbishvili is failing to garner the level of popular support enjoyed by other Georgian Dream-backed candidates since 2012. In a poll released October 25, 63% of voters expressed a “very” or “somewhat” negative view of Zurbishvili. Georgian Dream's approval rating is at 18%, a historic low.
- Georgian Dream has given indications of preparing to falsify the election, announcing an unsubstantiated “internal poll” by Ivanishvili's PR advisor allegedly showing 53% support for Zurbishvili.

Zurbishvili's unpopularity is energizing the pro-Western opposition. The “Strength in Unity” coalition, led by Grigol Vashadze—who served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs under ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili—is leading in the polls. To marginalize Vashadze and install Zurbishvili, the ruling party is already engaging in voter suppression, vote-buying, physical intimidation, and coercion through misuse of administrative resources. If targeted disenfranchisement fails to boost their Kremlin-friendly candidate Zurbishvili, the ruling party is likely to resort to outright election falsification.

A victory for Vashadze and the pro-Western opposition would bolster Georgians' trust in the electoral system, strengthen democratic institutions, and secure U.S. interests in Georgia. But if Zurbishvili is declared the winner, most Georgian voters would consider the result illegitimate. Extreme civil unrest would follow, which could give Moscow a pretext to justify more aggressive intervention in Georgia's internal affairs.

- U.S. officials must send a strong message emphasizing the importance of a peaceful transition of power following a free and fair presidential election.
- If U.S. officials fail to express concerns about Georgian Dream and the pre-election environment, Ivanishvili will interpret silence as tacit approval. The ruling party will be emboldened to install Zurbishvili, an unelectable candidate whose views are incompatible with U.S. interests, by any means necessary—including voter intimidation and fraud. This will result in widespread civil unrest.

BACKGROUND

Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in a pro-Western government led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, the Kremlin has demonstrated escalating aggression in attempting to bring Georgia back under Russian control. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. Russia occupies 20% of Georgian territory to this day, in violation of ceasefire agreements. Beyond conventional warfare, the Russian government has also targeted Georgia with cyber-attacks, information operations, and other hybrid tactics to establish an exclusive sphere of influence over the Caucasus region. The Russian government also funds political parties, extremist social movements (including self-described Neo-Nazis), non-governmental organizations, and media outlets to bolster Russian soft power in Georgia.

Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay off in October 2012, when the Georgian Dream coalition, led by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the parliamentary elections and drove Saakashvili's pro-Western party into opposition. Georgia's westward trajectory has faltered since Georgian Dream came to power. In February 2018, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats issued the DNI's *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, which highlighted serious concerns with the ruling party's

propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and causing internal problems as Georgia continues to face external threats from Russia.

High-level corruption, increased crime, economic stagnation, and a politicized justice system characterized by “clan-based governance” that “serves the interests of the ruling party” contribute to widespread popular discontent. Mass protests in June 2018 prompted the resignation of the prime minister and other high-ranking Georgian Dream officials.

Nevertheless, the Georgian people remain steadfastly committed to democratic development and closer ties with the West. But in failing to decisively secure U.S. interests in Georgia, the U.S. cedes the region to Russian control. **On the eve of the presidential election, Georgia is at a critical crossroads, and U.S. interests in the region face a major threat.**

GEORGIAN DREAM / SALOME ZURABISHVILI

The Georgian Dream-endorsed presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, is widely—and correctly—perceived as pro-Russian. She has pushed the Kremlin’s narrative for over a decade, against Georgian and U.S. security interests. Most concerning, **Zurbishvili has blamed the Georgian side for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, and in doing so, has suggested that the U.S. shares responsibility for the conflict by supporting the Georgian government.**

In Zurbishvili’s words:

- “The main purpose of Georgia’s conflict with Russia is to strengthen the loyalty of Georgia to the U.S. and U.K., and to guarantee that they will have control over the South Caucasus.” (*Agence France-Presse*, 08/08/2008)
- “If there were any mistakes made by the Georgian leadership, [the Americans] will share this responsibility since they were very close to the Georgian leadership.” (*L’Obs*, 08/25/2008)
 - Vladimir Putin referred to Zurbishvili’s remarks to justify Russia’s invasion and ongoing occupation of South Ossetia (*CNN*, 08/28/2008 and *Le Figaro*, 09/13/2008)
 - Zurbishvili has accused ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili and the Georgian military of committing “war crimes” in defense of Georgian territory in 2008. With ongoing cases in the Hague, Zurbishvili’s presidency would pave the way for the international community to place the blame on Georgia for the 2008 war—potentially leading to criminal indictments for Georgian officers.
- According to NDI polling, 75% of Georgians support NATO membership—but Zurbishvili has stated she is not interested in pursuing NATO integration, a foreign policy priority for Georgia since the early 2000s.
 - “Georgia cannot join NATO, and this is not a tragedy for me.” (Georgian TV interview, 2016)
 - Zurbishvili’s position coincides with that of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has long held that Georgia’s accession to NATO is “unacceptable” for the Kremlin.
- Zurbishvili has also claimed that George Soros orchestrated the Rose Revolution, a discredited Kremlin conspiracy theory: “The Soros NGO apparatus ran and financed the Rose Revolution.” (*Herodote*, April 2008)
- Zurbishvili has been criticized for racially insensitive rhetoric in a region with a history of ethnic tensions.
 - At a campaign speech in Akhalkalaki, where there is a sizeable Armenian population, Zurbishvili criticized Saakashvili’s party for granting citizenship to “thousands of Turks.” A coalition of 15 NGOs criticized Zurbishvili’s “xenophobic, racist and discriminatory” rhetoric and indicated she may have broken campaign laws against inciting “national strife and enmity,” due to the historical tensions between Armenians and Turks (Azeris, a Turkic people, are also a sizeable minority in Georgia).
 - Zurbishvili’s racially charged approach to the Armenian ethnic minority supports Russia’s strategy of exacerbating divisions among minorities in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe.
 - Civil society organizations also criticized Zurbishvili for posting on Facebook “*The French immigration service is extremely concerned by Chinese immigration because...the Chinese never die, members of one family can use one identity document, and who would be able to find any difference between them?*”

ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

Given the overwhelming pro-American sentiment among the Georgian people, Zurbishvili’s stated views make her a highly controversial candidate. Zurbishvili is failing to garner anywhere near the level of popular support enjoyed by other Georgian Dream-backed candidates since 2012. Her unfavorable rating of 63% is the highest in recent history. **Zurbishvili’s unpopularity is energizing and consolidating the opposition and driving pro-Western swing voters, even those who had earlier opposed Saakashvili, to vote against Georgian Dream.** Several opposition groups—including United National Movement, the former ruling party affiliated with Saakashvili—have come together under the “Strength in Unity” coalition, led by presidential candidate Grigol

(Gregory) Vashadze. Vashadze, the Minister of Foreign Affairs during Saakashvili's second term, is the only opposition candidate in a position to win the election.

- According to the most recent polling (Edison Research, 10/15-24), among likely voters, **Vashadze leads a crowded field of candidates with 37% support to Zurabishvili's 32% (MOE +/-3%)**
- If no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote on October 28, a second-round election will be held with the top two vote-getters, highly likely to be Vashadze and Zurabishvili.
 - Supporters of other opposition candidates (e.g., David Bakradze 16%, Shalva Natclashvili 6%) would be, on average, more likely to vote for Vashadze than Zurabishvili in a hypothetical second round and many would not vote. This means a runoff result would likely favor Vashadze.
 - Vashadze would earn 44% in a hypothetical runoff to Zurabishvili's 29%, with 27% undecided.
 - Among undecided voters, 60% have a negative view of Zurabishvili—*twice* Vashadze's negative rating.
- **Just 36% of voters expect any candidate to win the first round with more than 50%. Thus, if Zurabishvili is declared the winner with 50%+ on October 28, most voters would consider this result illegitimate.**

Ivanshvili, Georgian Dream, and the Kremlin are working to marginalize Vashadze due to his pro-Western platform and association with Saakashvili. Their objective is to ensure that Saakashvili will never return to Georgia because of Saakashvili's consistent opposition to Putin, who continues to denounce him publicly.

- Perennial, fringe pro-Russian candidates who openly receive financing from Moscow, including Nino Burjanadze and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), are not participating in the election.
- Burjanadze and APG's election "boycotts" were directed by Moscow to avoid splitting the pro-Russian vote. The support of overtly pro-Russian/Kremlin-backed parties, about 6-7% of the electorate, will benefit Zurabishvili.

VOTER SUPPRESSION AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT

As Vashadze opens up a wider lead over Zurabishvili in the polls, the ruling Georgian Dream party is likely to use the administrative apparatus, voter suppression, or outright electoral fraud to falsify the election results and install their Kremlin-friendly candidate. During the pre-election monitoring period from October 1-24, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)—Georgia's largest election observation mission—reported voter intimidation, vote-buying, and escalating attacks on monitoring organizations by the ruling party.

- ISFED observed numerous violations from Georgian Dream in the pre-election period including: pressure/coercion of voters, physical confrontation and violence, misuse of administrative resources, vote-buying/bribery in four electoral districts, and campaign law violations.
- As of October 24, ISFED has reported 32 violations in the pre-election period.
- In early October, Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, one of the most powerful Georgian Dream officials, called election monitors "accomplices of fascism."
- **Up to 90% of Georgian service-members on military bases will be prevented from participating in the election, depriving them of the right to choose their commander-in-chief.**
 - In a departure from previous policy, the Georgian Ministry of Defense recently announced that polling stations will not be available on military bases. There is no option to vote by mail/absentee ballot.
 - Active-duty service-members will be required to travel to their home precincts to vote, requiring permission from their commanding officers to take leave. Even if permission is granted, service-members face an undue burden of traveling hundreds of miles in one day to exercise their voting rights.
 - This policy constitutes de-facto disenfranchisement, as the ruling party is aware that Zurabishvili is unpopular with the military. Suppression of military voting is especially concerning as Zurabishvili has blamed the Georgian military for starting the 2008 war, and her presidency could have serious repercussions for ongoing court cases at The Hague (see above).
- **The government is misusing administrative resources to boost Zurabishvili's ratings and lower Vashadze's.**
 - On September 25, 2018, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) requested that all broadcasters cease airing Vashadze's political ads. The GNCC claimed that the ads, in attacking Zurabishvili's

record, violated broadcasting laws that prohibit “obscenity.” However, the ads did not include obscenity—they highlighted Zurabishvili’s controversial statements on the Russia-Georgia War.

- “We believe that an ad that uses a statement made previously by an election subject to present them in a negative light in the eyes of the voters has political value, regardless of whether one agrees with it or not. Therefore, this type of advertising is in line with the law.” (*Transparency International*, 10/03/2018)
- **Private businesses and state-funded entities are pressuring their employees to support the ruling party.**
 - Clinics reportedly compelled their doctors to donate GEL 100,000 to Zurabishvili’s campaign, potentially violating campaign finance laws.
 - In several regions, municipal officials are instructing their employees to mobilize supporters of Zurabishvili and provide Georgian Dream “precinct captains” with lists of potential voters. This is a misuse of public resources known as “network marketing” (see next section).
- **Georgian citizens living abroad have reported disenfranchisement.** About 850,000 Georgians have emigrated since 2012. Many of these eligible voters supported Saakashvili’s party and planned to vote for Vashadze.
 - On October 3-6, a Georgian citizen living in Switzerland attempted to register to vote online, and after several “technical errors,” she reported to the Georgian consulate in Bern to register in person. She was told that the consular officials were “on holiday” and was unable to register to vote.
 - In New York City, home to a large population of opposition-friendly Georgian emigrants and political asylees, eligible voters reported “technical errors” when attempting to register online between October 1-7, 2018. These errors were sporadic in nature.
 - There are no comprehensive election-monitoring efforts planned at Georgian consulates around the world.
- **Georgian citizens have reported finding inaccuracies in voter registration rolls via the Central Election Commission website.** Some households have reported seven fake identities registered at their home addresses.

POTENTIAL ELECTORAL FRAUD

If their attempts at voter suppression and manipulation fail, on Election Day, the ruling party may resort to various methods of electoral fraud. On October 18, Georgian Dream officials released a statement claiming that an “internal poll” showed Zurabishvili’s support at 53% among likely voters. The polling methodology was not released, but it was conducted by the Georgian firm “PsikoProeqti”—the director of which is Ivanishvili PR advisor Zurab Bigvava.

Georgian Dream’s polling, wildly inconsistent with independent polls during the same time period, indicates that the ruling party may attempt to falsify the election so Zurabishvili “wins” in the first round with more than 50%. Observers are on alert for:

- **Carousel voting:** Voters are transported to different polling stations to cast multiple votes for the ruling party.
- **Network marketing:** Georgian Dream “precinct captains” demand a certain number of votes from each household, verified by voters’ cell-phone photos of their ballots. The ruling party uses **administrative resources** to apply pressure to voters, because more than half of Georgia’s work-force are public-sector employees. (Monitors have reported multiple instances of this violation in pre-election observations).
- Georgian NGOs have reported voters being given **pre-filled ballots** with the Georgian Dream candidate’s name. “Precinct captains” affiliated with the ruling party ask voters to take cell-phone photos of their ballots to verify their vote. (This practice is referred to as “Armenian carousel,” not to be confused with carousel voting.)
- Independent media outlets and civil society groups have reported that the government is planning electricity cuts on Election Day to manipulate the vote counts. On October 12, 2018, the chairman of a polling station in Gori (a Georgian Dream member) told Radio Mosaic anonymously that he was “disgusted” by the ruling party’s plan for Election Day. He claimed that electricity will be cut for ten minutes on the night of October 28, giving Georgian Dream members a window of opportunity for ballot-stuffing.

PRESSURE ON BUSINESS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

On October 16, Transparency International expressed alarm at “recent indications of increased state capture in Georgia and verbal attacks on civil society by prominent members of government” in the run-up to the election. TI Chairperson Delia Ferriera Rubio stated that “the recent backsliding on democratic governance is extremely troubling.”

- **Civil society activists and media organizations report intimidation and harassment from Georgian Dream officials, ranging from verbal attacks to false imprisonment and selective justice.**
 - On October 4, 2018, Irakli Kobakhidze (Executive Secretary of Georgian Dream and Parliament Speaker) publicly derided civil society organizations, including Transparency International, as “fascists.”

- Following Kobakhidze's remarks, Transparency International Georgia's Executive Director received threats of physical retaliation and became the subject of a smear campaign on social media.
- A coalition of 12 local and international non-governmental organizations, including the major election observers, responded with a statement criticizing "a severe crisis in the governance system, clear signs of high-level corruption and informal, clan rule." From the coalition statement on October 10, 2018: "It is critically important that the work of the organizations observing the election environment is not hampered and that their activities are protected from groundless and purposeful discrediting."
- After two major election observers, Georgian Young Lawyers Association and International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), published a critical assessment of the pre-election environment, Georgian Dream officials attacked these watchdog groups. Inappropriate criticism came from government agencies, including the Central Election Commission. On October 9, Transparency International Georgia left the Interagency Commission in protest.
- On October 22, Georgian Dream member and Minister of Justice Tea Tsulukiani criticized Transparency International Georgia leader Eka Gigauri, making a false accusation about Gigauri's past government service and implying she is a partisan Saakashvili supporter. A coalition of 11 NGOs responded to Tsulukiani with a statement defending Gigauri and affirming that all share Transparency International's concerns about the pre-election environment and the government's attacks on civil society.
- **American investors in Georgia have reported unfair treatment by the government, while investment from Russia, China, and Iran has increased.**
 - International firms with major investments in Georgia, including Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco, were court-ordered to pay exorbitant fines to Georgian tobacco companies connected to ruling party officials. (*Transparency International*, 10/03/2018)
 - "Recently publicized secret audio recordings suggest that Georgia is afflicted by high-level corruption... High-level government officials and the ruling Georgian Dream party appear to have benefited from the arrangement. What is more, the representatives of the judiciary have also allegedly played a part."
 - On June 22, 2018, U.S. Representative Pete Sessions (R-TX) criticized the Georgian Dream government for "aggressive and discouraging actions toward American companies operating in Georgia." Rep. Sessions expressed concern with reports of "favorable outreach to companies from Iran, China, and Russia." (Georgian firms are reportedly repackaging goods to circumvent Western sanctions on Iran.)

DISINFORMATION AND THE MEDIA

Television and other traditional news outlets connected to Georgian Dream officials are targeting voters with disinformation and propaganda to influence the result of the presidential election. According to NDI polling, 68% of Georgians believe that Georgian television stations spread disinformation.

- **The government, particularly the judiciary, is putting undue pressure on independent media in advance of the election, preventing voters from hearing alternative perspectives.**
- Zaza Okuashvili, owner of the independent TV station "Iberia TV," claimed in September 2018 that the Georgian courts treated his media company unfairly, levying exorbitant fines after he refused to participate in a Georgian Dream-linked corruption scheme.
- Okuashvili released bank statements, receipts and recordings as evidence after accusing Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream officials of extortion, racketeering and money-laundering.
- Iberia TV journalists also report that Georgian Dream officials attempted to install a party member as the chairman of the media outlet because Ivanishvili was unhappy with criticism from the channel. An Iberia TV representative said that Georgian Dream was "terrorizing" the station, and the Media Advocacy Coalition criticized crackdowns on independent media in the run-up to the election.
- Following these conflicts with authorities, Iberia TV was shut down on October 16, 2018.
- The pro-government TV channel "Imedi" suspended its regular political satire show after the anchor, comedian Vasiko Odishvili, mocked Georgian Dream official Kobakhidze.
- **Internet "troll farms," similar to those used by Russian intelligence services, are also deployed to attack the opposition and boost the ruling party on social media through disinformation efforts.** Georgian Dream is using the Kremlin's tactics to manipulate public opinion in favor of the pro-Russian candidate, Zurabishvili.
 - On October 24, Rustavi 2 TV CEO Nika Gvaramia reported that the opposition-minded channel had experienced a cyber-attack that took down its website.
 - This attack came hours after Ivanishvili told a Rustavi 2 journalist that the channel "will no longer have the opportunity to hinder the expression of differing opinions."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before, during, and after the presidential election on October 28, U.S. government officials and international observers must stress the importance of a free and fair election and a peaceful transition of power.

- The integrity of this election must be evaluated in a holistic manner, including reports from the polls as well as reports on disinformation in the media, government criticism of civil society, and targeted disenfranchisement in the weeks leading up to the election.
- U.S. government and international observers must issue swift, unequivocal condemnations of any improper tactics used by the ruling party and government to influence the result of the election.

A victory for Vashadze, the pro-Western opposition candidate, in a free and fair election would bolster Georgians' trust in the electoral system and strengthen democratic institutions in Georgia. At the same time, this outcome would secure U.S. interests in Georgia by dealing a blow to the Kremlin's designs on the region. If Zurabishvili is declared the winner, it is likely that the majority of Georgian voters would consider the election result illegitimate. Extreme civil unrest would follow a Zurabishvili "victory" on October 28, which could provide the Kremlin a pretext to justify more aggressive intervention in Georgia's internal affairs.

- To avoid this worst-case scenario, U.S. officials must send a strong message to the government and people of Georgia calling for a peaceful transition of power following a free and fair presidential election.
- If U.S. officials fail to express concerns about Georgian Dream and the pre-election environment, Ivanishvili will interpret silence as tacit approval. In this scenario, the ruling party would be emboldened to install Zurabishvili—an unelectable candidate whose views are incompatible with U.S. interests—by any means necessary.

I am reaching out to share some information with you that may be relevant in advance of the presidential election. Please feel free to share with anyone who may be interested.

In reporting around the election, we have noticed that some observers give equal weight to the polling conducted by Edison Research and "PsikoProeqti." While no public opinion poll can be perfectly accurate, there are several factors that differentiate Edison from PsikoProeqti. Please see the memo attached (Pasted below in full for your convenience) and feel free to contact me if you have any further questions.

Georgia: Polls ahead of 2018 Presidential Elections

- Edison Research (<https://www.edisonresearch.com/>) is a **US-based** research firm with a large pool of clients, including **CNN, CBS, ESPN, NBC News, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, ABC, New York Times, Politico;**
- Edison Research is a member of **ESOMAR**, whose Code of Conduct is co-owned and sponsored by the **International Chamber of Commerce** to champion good research and ensure adherence to professional standards. It is a global community of data and research firms, uniting 550 companies in 130+ countries (<https://www.esomar.org/what-we-do/about-us>);
- Since 2004, as the sole provider of Election Day Polling data to the National Election Pool in the U.S., Edison has **conducted exit polls to project** and analyze results for **every major presidential primary and general election in the U.S.**, providing exit polls and tabulating the national vote **for ABC News, CBS News, CNN, and NBC News** ^[1];
- All polling results presented by Edison Research are in line with **AAPOR** (American Association of Public Opinion Researchers) **standards**;
- Edison Research has conducted opinion polls and exit polls **in Georgia since 2010**. Their exit polls have consistently **coincided** (within the established margin of error) **with final election results** of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia. Please see examples below:

2017 Tbilisi Mayoral Race

	Edison Research exit poll	CEC result
Kaladze	54%	51.09%
Udumashvili	16%	16.59%
Elisashvili	15%	17.48%

2012 Parliamentary Elections		
	Edison Research exit poll	CEC result
Georgian Dream	51%	54.97%
UNM	41%	40.34%

· In the lead-up to 2018 presidential election, Edison Research was **commissioned by Rustavi 2** to conduct a Pre-Election Survey in three waves. Every Pre-Election Survey wave has been presented with information about relevant **methodology**. The latest wave was conducted between October 15 – 24, interviewing 2001 respondents face-to-face; respondents were selected through random sampling; all respondents were above 18, who are eligible to vote. The results are as follows:

ü If presidential elections were held tomorrow, who would you vote for?

	All respondents (unallocated)	All respondents (allocated)	Likely voters allocated
Vashadze	23%	31%	37%
Zurabishvili	21%	28%	32%
Bakradze	10%	14%	16%

Natelashvili	4%	5%	6%
DK/RA	31%	16%	0% (full allocation)

To provide a counter-narrative to the Edison Research poll, the ruling **Georgian Dream** party has presented party-commissioned polling **conducted by PsikoProeqti (Psycho Project)**, showing in allocated results, **Zurabishvili winning in the first round with 54%.**

Ø Publically available information on **“PsikoProeqti”** is rather scarce; however, what makes its results highly questionable is the following:

- It is owned by Zurab Bigvava, PR consultant of the ruling party;
- It is NOT a member of ESOMAR;
- It does not use AAPOR standards;
- It presents no clear research methodology in presenting the polls;
- It has NO international clients.

To win the election in the first round, a candidate must receive at least 50% + 1 of the vote. The only polling conducted in the country in the lead-up to the election that is in line with international research standards, is projecting a **run-off/second round.**

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 29, 2018

SUBJECT: Presidential Election in Georgia

BACKGROUND

Yesterday, Georgian voters participated in the last presidential election in which the head of state will be elected by direct ballot. Although the president is less powerful than the parliament according to Georgia's constitution, the president plays a crucial role in defining Georgia's image and interests on the world stage. Largely due to her controversial foreign policy stances, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) coalition backed "independent" candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, has failed to gain the level of popular support enjoyed by other GD-backed candidates since 2012.

REPORTED VIOLATIONS

Pre-Electoral Environment: The legislative framework favors the ruling party, *inter alia*, due to the recent increase of electoral commission members at each level of election administration. The increase is the result of recent amendments to the Election Code, adopted single-handedly by GD against civil society and opposition criticism. The neutrality of election commissions was further compromised due to heavy political interference in the appointment of so-called professional members of the election administration.

While a perennial problem in Georgian elections, this election cycle saw a further intensification of government efforts to pressure public servants into supporting the pro-government candidate.¹ Rustavi 2 TV broadcast a number of audio and video recordings in proof of such government pressure. Monitors have also reported multiple instances of this violation in pre-election observations.² Pressure on military personnel and their families was also documented. In addition to such mobilization of administrative resources, the pre-electoral period was marred by the use of hate speech³, attacks against civil society⁴ and vandalization of campaign materials.⁶

Election Day, October 28: By the close of polls, observers from Transparency International, other NGOs, and the opposition had reported numerous minor and serious violations at precincts throughout the country. • In a statement released mid-day, Transparency International reported several serious violations by GD, including election-fixing, vote-buying, refusal of entry to observers, and violations of campaign laws.⁷

- The United Opposition implemented crowd-sourced tracking of violations, receiving 1,287 reports throughout Election Day and the vote-counting process. Of the reported violations, most serious related to **vote-buying** and **voter intimidation/mobilization** of voters by **GD coordinators** and other unidentified individuals inside and outside polling stations. The United Opposition documented such cases throughout the country, indicating the systemic nature of their occurrence.
- Although not all crowd-sourced reports have been verified, many voters included video footage and photographic evidence of violations taking place in real time.⁸ These violations included numerous instances of vote-buying, pre-filled ballots, unlawful political agitation, and one instance of a GD member attempting to bribe a registrar to leave the polling station for an hour.

¹ There are approximately 200,000 public-sector employees in Georgia, about half of the total workforce. Many of these are the sole breadwinners for their households and can influence relatives' votes.

² <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

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<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/employees-non-profit-non-commercial-legal-entities-municipalities-are-possibly-instructed> ⁴ At the 15 October 2018 parliamentary bureau session, the Speaker of Parliament noted that they [the ruling party] would “bang the opposition over the head” in the elections <https://www.newsmedia.ge/?p=4087>; he also referred to UNM and Rustavi 2 director Nika Gvaramia as fascists:

<https://1tv.ge/en/news/irakli-kobakhidze-who-covers-up-to-fascism-is-an-accomplice-of-fascism/> ⁵ Speaker Kobakhidze, Prime Minister Bakhtadze, Justice Minister Tsulukiani and GD Chairman Ivanishvili all attacked leading Georgian electoral watchdog organizations (GYLA, TI, ISFED) in the lead-up to the elections.

⁶ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

⁷ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/statement-about-ongoing-electoral-process-0700-1300>

⁸ <https://dzalaertobashia.ge/vmap>

- Georgian citizens living abroad reported disenfranchisement in the pre-election period and on Election Day. Voters at Georgian consulates in the USA (New York and Washington), Greece, and Germany reported that, although they had registered to vote before the deadline, their names were not on the voter rolls.

POST-ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT

After the announcement of first exit poll results at 8 p.m., conducted by Edison Research⁹, where the United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze and the government-backed candidate Salome Zurabishvili tied at 40% - 40%, GD attempted to advance a counter-narrative, by claiming that GD-commissioned exit polling by “Psycho Project” (PsikoProeqti), showed Zurabishvili’s support at 52%.

The Central Election Commission (CEC) made its first preliminary statement at 00:54 on 29 October 2018, announcing the results of 512 polling stations (13% of the total), with Zurabishvili leading at 40.05% and Vashadze coming in second at 37.93%. Shortly thereafter, GD conceded a second round.

At 12:00 today, with 3692 out of 3700 PECs counted, the two candidates stand at 37.74% (Vashadze) and 38.63% (Zurabishvili). The gradual decrease of Zurabishvili’s support in CEC-publicized results from 00:54 to 12:00 may indicate that the CEC gave priority to the publication of those PECs, where the government candidate had a higher advantage over the runner-up.

Scuffles occurred in a number of PECs during counting; one case of a beating was documented at DEC #8 in Tbilisi.

The third runner-up, David Bakradze, endorsed the United Opposition candidate within minutes of the exit poll announcement. Bakradze, of the European Georgia party, earned about 10% in the exit poll and CEC results.

The run-off/second round must be held two weeks after the *final* poll results are announced. The deadline for a second round is December 2, but it may be held earlier.

⁹ Please see information on the ESOMAR-member, U.S.-based firm, its standing and international clients, which include large news networks such as CNN, at <https://www.edisonresearch.com/>

I came across your articles on the Georgian presidential election and wanted to share some information with you that may be useful for future reporting in advance of the second round. In the attached memo, I summarize the reasons that Vashadze's "upset" victory was not surprising. A few points:

- In April 2018, 67% of Georgians reported their country was "going in the wrong direction" in an IRI poll. This figure is up from just 31% before the 2012 parliamentary election, when Saakashvili's unpopularity was at its height.
- In the past six months, the revelations of high-level corruption among GD officials (particularly the Omega case) and case-fixing in the Khorava Street murders (Saralidze case) have further inflamed popular discontent with GD.
- GD continues to campaign on anti-Saakashvili/anti-UNM sentiment, which is less effective as the years pass. UNM has not had any power for 6 years, and in that time, GD has consolidated power without delivering on promises made in 2012.
- Salome Zurbishvili's comments on the 2008 Russian-Georgian War are unacceptable to most Georgians, and have driven non-political Georgians to vote for the opposition candidate.
- Edison Research predicted high support for Vashadze in pre-election polling, and has proven to be more accurate than Psycho Project, the GD-commissioned poll that many outlets cited.

In short, with support from other opposition parties - particularly Bakradze's European Georgia, the third runner-up with 10-11% - Vashadze has a major advantage going into the second round.

GD may attempt to use administrative pressure to boost turnout, but turnout of 47% in the first round on 28 October is equivalent to turnout in the previous presidential election, so it is unlikely to increase enough to give Zurbishvili a significant advantage. Moreover, it appears with Kaladze's statements yesterday that GD is attempting to distance itself from Zurbishvili.

I am in Tbilisi and would be happy to set up a meeting if you have any questions or would like to discuss further.

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 28, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party experienced its first major electoral setback since coming to power in 2012. The GD-backed presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, statistically tied with United Opposition candidate Gregory Vashadze, falling short of GD's expectations of a comfortable first round victory.

- Zurbishvili's result is being largely attributed to her controversial foreign policy stances (particularly

the accusation against Georgia for the 2008 Russian invasion), xenophobic statements, fallout with the church over drug policy and widespread popular dissatisfaction with GD, due in part to rising poverty.

- **Zurabishvili's disapproval rating is at 63%**, with 41% voters stating they would “never” vote for her; only 13% state the same of Vashadze.¹

Pre-Electoral Environment OSCE/ODIHR reported concerns about the impartiality of election administration, misuse of administrative resources blurring the line between the ruling party and the state, lack of effective monitoring on political financing and an imbalance of the playing field, as well as pressure from government agencies, limiting public sector's employees ability to vote free of fear of retribution². Other observers also

reported **government coercion** of voters, **assault**, **vote-buying** and **campaign law violations**.³ The pre electoral period was also marred by the use of hate speech⁴, attacks against civil society⁵ and vandalism of campaign materials.⁶ Transparency International expressed alarm at “increased state capture in Georgia and verbal attacks on civil society by prominent members of government” in the run-up to the election that served to undermine their legitimacy.⁷

Election Day: The United Opposition implemented crowd-sourced tracking of violations, receiving a total of 1,287 reports. Of the reported violations, most serious related to **vote-buying** and **voter intimidation/mobilization** of voters by **GD coordinators** inside and outside polling stations. Cases were documented throughout the country, indicating the systemic nature of their occurrence.

- TI reported vote-buying, refusal of entry to observers and violations of campaign laws.⁸ • ISFED, a local election watchdog, indicated violations in vote counting, including improper filling of final voting protocols and restriction of the rights of observers. In some precincts, ballots that indicated voter's choices were improperly invalidated.⁹
- ODIHR also confirmed mobilization of voters by GD coordinators, raising concerns about voters being able to vote free of pressure and fear of retribution and noted that over 420 election-related complaints were filed to the District Election Commissions (DECs).

With 99.57% of votes counted, the two candidates stand at **37.74% (Vashadze)** and **38.63% (Zurabishvili)**.¹⁰ It is worth noting that ISFED's parallel vote tabulation (PVT) placed Vashadze first. Albeit due to the margin of error, ISFED has indicated that actual result may favor either candidate, highlighting the slim margin of difference between the two. Voter turnout was 46.6% (+/- 0.8%), similar to the 2013 Presidential election.

Shortly after the exit poll announcement on election night, **the opposition began to coalesce around Vashadze**. The third runner-up, David Bakradze of European Georgia (10%), has endorsed Vashadze as well

¹ Edison Research polling, October 15-24 (<http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/117002>)

² available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

³ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

⁴ At the 15 October 2018 parliamentary bureau session, the Speaker of Parliament noted that they [the ruling party] would “bang the opposition over the head” in the elections <https://www.newsmedia.ge/?p=4087>; he also referred to UNM and Rustavi 2 director Nika Gvaramia as fascists: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/irakli-kobakhidze-who-covers-up-to-fascism-is-an-accomplice-of-fascism/>

⁵ Speaker Kobakhidze, Prime Minister Bakhtadze, Justice Minister Tsulukiani and GD Chairman Ivanishvili all attacked leading Georgian electoral watchdog organizations (GYLA, TI, ISFED) in the lead-up to the elections.

⁶ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

⁷ https://www.transparency.org/news/pressrelease/alarm_over_increasing_signs_of_state_capture_and_pressure_on_civil_society ⁸ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/statement-about-ongoing-electoral-process-0700-1300>

⁹<http://www.isfed.ge/main/1436/eng/>

¹⁰<http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

as the Republican Party—formerly part of the GD coalition and Zurab Japaridze of “Girchi”. Negotiations are underway with other presidential candidates/parties.

Second-round election: According to Georgian law, the run-off must be held two weeks after the *final* poll results are announced. The deadline for the election is December 2, but the second round may be held earlier if the official vote count is finalized in a timely manner. GD was caught off-guard by the strong performance of the opposition in the first round and is likely to attempt to **drag out the second-round contest through pressure on the CEC and judiciary**. To promote a peaceful and fair democratic process, Georgia’s international partners must express support for a timely vote count and run-off election.

Given the opposition votes exceeding (at 61.36%) pro-government support on October 28th and the momentum from the strongest opposition performance since 2012, Vashadze has a decisive advantage going into the second round. The last wave of pre-election polling, released October 25, indicated that Vashadze would earn 44% to Zurabishvili’s 29% in a hypothetical second round; 27% did not know or refused to answer. 60% of undecided voters had a negative view of Zurabishvili.¹¹

Alarming response from ruling party: Zurabishvili’s unexpected performance in the first round has revealed **heightened discord within GD**. Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, one of the highest-profile GD officials, blamed the election result on GD supporting an “independent candidate” on October 29. The same day,

Zurabishvili refused multiple requests to speak to media.¹² Going into the second round, it is likely that:

- GD will continue to use **administrative pressure and coercion to boost voter turnout**. However, the ruling party already used administrative resources to achieve the lackluster first-round result. • Accusing opposition of provoking civil unrest, **GD will attempt to incite fear of an opposition victory to mobilize voters**.¹³ GD MP Gedevan Popkhadze stated on 30 October that a victory for Vashadze in the second round would “**trigger civil war**”.¹⁴ GD MP Irakli Sesiashvili, chair of the parliamentary security committee, warned that Vashadze’s victory would “destabilize the country,” vowing to be one of the “soldiers” in the “fight to protect the nation from traitors, torturers, and human-haters”.¹⁵

These inflammatory statements come as opposition has become victim of physical attacks. • On October 30, GD MP Enzel Mkoyan orchestrated an attack on the United Opposition campaign office in Akhalkalaki, where his brother and 20 other men armed with clubs and weapons severely beat four United Opposition members, including two DEC members—where opposition suspects voter fraud.¹⁶ • It is notable that the attack occurred in a majority-Armenian community, where Zurabishvili had campaigned with discriminatory rhetoric designed to inflame ethnic tensions between Armenians and Turks (considered “hate speech” by NGOs and pre-election observers).¹⁷ The Kremlin has used similar tactics to exacerbate ethnic strife in the region.

Key Takeaways:

- GD officials’ **inflammatory accusations against the opposition** e.g., “civil war”
—should be unequivocally condemned by Georgia’s international partners;

- To combat **impunity** and allow for a peaceful pre-election environment it is necessary for authorities to complete a **timely investigation of attacks on opposition**;
- Georgia's international partners must also express support for a prompt **tabulation of the final vote count, allowing for a timely announcement of the run-off date by the CEC.**

¹¹ Edison Research polling, October 15-24, available at: (<http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/117002>)

¹² See [video](#)

¹³

<https://1tv.ge/en/news/giorgi-gakharia-know-details-plans-aiming-cause-destabilization-however-elections-will-held-peaceful-safe-environment/>

¹⁴

<http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/117497?fbclid=IwAR1ZjHaS1dZ17hxIJn8hP1v5MUs7uK9YpwHrVOAtm0u43Ft3iKfBagCGifk> ¹⁵ <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/138898-sesiashvili-viqnebi-pirveli-jariskaci-vinc-qvekanas-moghalateebisgandaicavs?fbclid=IwAR1YX0ljn0PS2eUPuGlvJVh3RMeEOYf9JaOxR831KFzBPLlh8qgEY4Re8z8> ¹⁶

<https://dfwatch.net/four-unm-activists-hospitalized-after-party-office-in-akhalkalaki-attacked-by-gd-supporters-52478> ¹⁷ <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/ngos-salome-zurabishvilis-xenophobic-statement>

Timeline: Political Violence in the Georgian Presidential Election

Pre-Election Environment (September 10-October 27)

- During the pre-election monitoring period, observers reported concerns about the impartiality of election administration, misuse of administrative resources, and pressure from government agencies, limiting public sector's employees ability to vote free of fear of retribution¹.
- Observers noted **government coercion** of voters, **assault**, **vote-buying** and **campaign law violations**.² The pre-electoral period was also marred by the use of hate speech³, attacks against civil society⁴ and vandalization of campaign materials.⁵
- Several instances of political violence and intimidation by Georgian Dream (GD) members against United Opposition supporters were reported. These took place in different locations, indicating the systemic nature of these violations.
 - o September 11: United Opposition member of **Bolnisi DEC #23** Eka Sharia filed a dissent opinion at the DEC meeting on appointment of relatives of local Georgian Dream and DEC administration officials as PEC members in violation of law, and left the meeting in protest. Sharia received a call from Bolnisi police detective Gia Devnozashvili and was summoned for interrogation. This was coordinated between the police and DEC Chair as an act of politically motivated intimidation against Sharia.⁶
 - o September 27: United Opposition member of **Akhalkalaki DEC #40** Mrs. Teona Chalidze was verbally and physically assaulted by the DEC Chair Mrs. Hasmik Marangozyan.⁷
 - Marangozyan attempted to stop Artur Mkoyan, representative of Christian-Conservative Party, translating from Armenian for Chalidze as all communication between the DEC members was conducted in Armenian in violation of law. After the argument escalated, GD DEC member Anna Oganessian shoved Chalidze in the corridor and Marangozyan grabbed her by clothes, hit her in the face, forced her out of the room and crushed her against the exit door.
 - Chalidze called the police and was transferred to the Deputy Head of Samtskhe-Javakheti Department Givi Sikharulidze for interrogation. During the interview there were weapons displayed on the table - a pistol and a machine gun – to exert psychological pressure on Chalidze.
 - Complaints about the incident were filed to the CEC, IATF, and the General Inspection of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. *See the copies of complaints and photos attached.*
 - o October 8: United Opposition representatives were meeting with voters in **Didube** when Mariam Kapanadze, Director of Kindergarten #15 and active member of the Georgian Dream - Head of Didube Zone, approached the group and tried to disrupt the meeting by shouting insults. When Kapanadze was recognized by some attendees, she hit United Opposition member Tamar Zerekidze with a bag, causing her to bleed from the face. Zerekidze and other

¹ available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

² <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

³ At the 15 October 2018 parliamentary bureau session, the Speaker of Parliament noted that they [the ruling party] would “bang the opposition over the head” in the elections <https://www.newsmedia.ge/?p=4087>; he also referred to UNM as fascists: Nika Gvaramia as fascists: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/irakli-kobakhidze-who-covers-up-to-fascism-is-an-accomplice-of-fascism/>

⁴ Speaker Kobakhidze, Prime Minister Bakhtadze, Justice Minister Tsulukiani and GD Chairman Ivanishvili all attacked leading Georgian electoral watchdog organizations (GYLA, TI, ISFED) in the lead-up to the elections.

⁵ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

⁶ For more details and the phone recording, see [Rustavi 2](#) report (Georgian)

⁷ Link to the video at the police station: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/114749>

Link to media briefing: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/114749>

Link to Rustavi 2 coverage of the incident: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/114776>

witnesses were interrogated by the police. However, no further measures have been taken so far. *See photos and video attached.*

First-Round Election Day (October 28)

By the close of polls on the first round election day, observers and the opposition had reported numerous minor and serious violations at precincts throughout the country. ODIHR confirmed mobilization of voters by GD coordinators in the first round, raising concerns about voters being able to vote free of pressure and fear of retribution.

- o No candidate exceeded the 50% threshold required to win. Two candidates will advance to the second round: Salome Zourabichvili, backed by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, and United Opposition leader Grigol Vashadze. Zurabishvili and Vashadze received almost equal support in the first round: 38.4% and 37.73%, respectively.⁸
- o The Central Election Commission has not yet announced the date of the run-off.
- **October 29-30:** Caught off-guard by Vashadze's strong performance in the first round, GD attempted to incite fear of an opposition victory to mobilize pro-government voters and intimidate opposition supporters.⁹
 - o **GD MP Gedevan Popkhadze** stated that an opposition victory in the second round would "trigger civil war"¹⁰ and referred to the United Opposition as a "fascist force."¹¹
 - o **GD MP Irakli Sesiashvili**, chair of the parliamentary security committee, warned that Vashadze's victory would "destabilize the country," vowing to be one of the "soldiers" in the "fight to protect the nation from traitors, torturers, and human-haters".¹²
 - o High Council of Justice member **Anna Dolidze** echoed GD threats of civil unrest and warned that the Georgian currency would collapse in the event of an opposition victory.¹³

Inflammatory statements from ruling party officials come as opposition supporters—especially in rural and ethnic minority communities—have become victims of physical attacks.

- **October 29:** Two GD supporters **beat** Aliosha Gulioghi, representative of State for People party (member of the United Opposition) at PEC #8 in **Kaspi** (DEC #30).¹⁴
 - o The same two individuals threatened Gulioghli on the night of the election outside the PEC, where the United Opposition candidate Gregory Vashadze was leading in the polls.
 - o According to the final CEC protocol, GD-backed candidate, Zourabishvili won by 6 votes.
 - o The two individuals threatened Gulioghli with rape in the early hours of October 29th and subsequently beat him in the street. He suffered blunt force trauma to the face and was treated for a concussion. The MIA has started an investigation under Criminal Code Article 126 (violence).
 - o Gulioghli reported that he recognized his attackers as local representatives of GD.
 - o Please see attached photo of Gulioghli, also video ([Rustavi 2](#))
- **October 29:** Other instances of political violence were reported in **Marneuli**, a majority ethnic Azeri community.

⁸ <http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

⁹

<https://1tv.ge/en/news/giorgi-gakharia-know-details-plans-aiming-cause-destabilization-however-elections-will-held-peaceful-safe-environment/>

¹⁰ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/117497?fbclid=IwAR1ZjHaS1dZ17hxIJn8hP1v5MU57uK9YpwHrVOAtm0u43Ft3iKfBagCGifk>

¹¹ <https://jam-news.net/presidential-elections-in-georgia-why-is-the-ruling-party-talking-about-civil-war/>

¹² [Tabula](#) (Georgian)

¹³ [Interpress News](#) (Georgian)

¹⁴ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

- o An opposition supporter, identified only as “Fouad,” reported that local GD representatives threatened him with “revenge” if Zurabishvili was defeated in Marneuli.¹⁵
- o Marneuli City Hall officials are accused of beating an opposition supporter. The investigation into both incidents is ongoing.¹⁶

October 30 – November 8

Several alarming incidents have occurred in **Akhalkalaki**, where the majority of citizens are ethnic Armenians. During her campaign, Zurabishvili visited this political hotspot and used discriminatory rhetoric to inflame ethnic tensions. NGOs and election observers condemned Zurabishvili’s remarks as “hate speech.”¹⁷ Since the first round, five opposition supporters in Akhalkalaki have been hospitalized after severe beatings, which appear to be politically motivated. GD MP Enzel Mkoyan and his associates/relatives have been implicated in these attacks.¹⁸

Ruling party officials, including Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze, have endorsed this political violence by expressing solidarity with Mkoyan. The Ministry of Internal Affairs is addressing these incidents in a manner that does not adequately correspond with the seriousness of these attacks. The ruling party has categorically refused to suspend the mandate of Mkoyan, and his associates have been released on bail of less than \$1,000.¹⁹ Such impunity breeds an atmosphere of violence, which threatens the peaceful, democratic process before the runoff presidential election.

- October 30:
 - o **GD MP Enzel Mkoyan** orchestrated an attack on the United Opposition campaign office in Akhalkalaki, where the opposition suspects voter fraud in the first round.
 - o About 40 men armed with clubs and batons severely beat four United Opposition members, including two DEC members, in a premeditated assault.²⁰
 - o Mkoyan’s relatives took part in this attack: the ID card of Mkoyan’s brother was found at the scene, along with a piece of paper on which one victim’s license-plate number was written. This indicates premeditation. Of the five individuals who have been charged, three are relatives of Mkoyan.²¹
 - o The DEC members were assaulted before they could report the alleged electoral fraud. All four victims sustained injuries severe enough to require hospitalization. As of November 9, more than 10 days after the incident, they were still hospitalized.²²
- November 1-2:
 - o **Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze** *endorsed* this political violence, stating that the ruling party offers “full support” to Mkoyan.²³
 - o Kobakhidze, along with **majority leader Archil Talakvadze** and other high-profile GD members, blamed the unarmed United Opposition activists for provoking the attack.²⁴
- November 8:
 - o United Opposition supporter Remik Poghosyan was hospitalized after a severe assault by unidentified individuals. This attack also appears politically motivated: Poghosyan was

¹⁵ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

¹⁶ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

¹⁷ <http://tdi.ge/en/statement/ngos-salome-zurabishvilis-xenophobic-statement>

¹⁸ *See presentation attached.*

¹⁹ <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45120/>

²⁰ <https://dfwatch.net/four-umm-activists-hospitalized-after-party-office-in-akhalkalaki-attacked-by-gd-supporters-52478>

²¹ <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot/>

²² <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot/>

²³ <https://civil.ge/archives/263397>

²⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/263397>

beaten shortly after an interview with opposition-friendly TV channel Rustavi 2, in which he accused Mkoyan of corruption.²⁵

In recent days, the ruling party has intensified its rhetoric against the United Opposition in a manner that crosses the line from negative campaigning to outright incitement. Given the ruling party's endorsement of recent political violence in Akhalkalaki, the escalation of such threatening rhetoric by GD's leadership is especially concerning.

• November 12:

- o Speaker of Parliament **Irakli Kobakhidze** called the United Opposition a “criminal, dirty political force” rather than a legitimate political movement.²⁶ Given the United Opposition's broad popular support, as demonstrated in the first round of the election, Kobakhidze's statement demonizes not only opposition politicians—but also the nearly 40% of Georgian voters who supported Vashadze in the first round.
- o Tbilisi Mayor **Kakha Kaladze**, a high-ranking GD official, accused United Opposition of planning a “revolutionary scenario.”²⁷ He offered no evidence to support this accusation.
- o Vice-Speaker of Parliament **Irma Inashvili**, a member of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (a pro-Russian party that has endorsed Zurabishvili and usually votes with the ruling party) threatened physical harm to United Opposition members and their families.²⁸

Conclusions

Approaching the second round election, it is likely that GD will continue to use administrative pressure and coercion to boost voter turnout. In an atmosphere of heightened tensions and impunity for the ruling party, GD's verbal and physical intimidation of the opposition—and the broader electorate—can be expected to escalate.

Ruling party officials' **inflammatory accusations against the opposition**, as well as all instances of **political violence**, should be unequivocally condemned by Georgia's international partners. To combat **impunity** and allow for a peaceful pre-election environment, it is necessary for authorities to complete a **timely and impartial investigation of attacks on opposition**.

UNITED OPPOSITION STATEMENT ON ALLEGED DEATH THREATS DIRECTED AT
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SALOME ZURABISHVILI

November 12, 2018

The United Opposition and its presidential candidate Gregory Vashadze unequivocally condemn all forms of violence and/or threats of violence directed at any public figure. The United Opposition has no involvement in, nor knowledge of, the alleged death threats against presidential candidate Salome Zurabishvili and members of her family.

Zurabishvili has declined to identify individuals making the threats. She does not allege that any member of any party in the United Opposition coalition is responsible; however, she has claimed that social media posts of those making the threats

²⁵ <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot/>

²⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/265066>

²⁷

<https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/99116-kaladze-we-will-not-give-way-implementation-of-the-revolutionary-plans-of-saa-kashvili-vashadze-and-his-russian-political-experts-in-our-country/>

²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/news.on.ge/videos/316472309133491/>

indicate their support of the United National Movement (UNM), one of the parties in the United Opposition.

The United Opposition encourages the Ministry of Interior (MIA) to conduct a timely investigation into Zurabishvili's allegations and bring to justice all those responsible, regardless of their political affiliation. Without a timely investigation and disclosure of evidence, these allegations may be perceived as unfounded attempts of victimization by the candidate for electoral purposes.

We also call on the MIA to investigate other cases of politically motivated violence, particularly recent incidents in Kaspi, Marneuli and Akhalkalaki, as well as threats of violence, including systematic intimidation against opposition activists and supporters. We call on public figures, including Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze and Vice-Speaker Irma Inashvili, to abstain from statements inciting violence. Finally, we demand a requalification of charges pressed against four individuals involved in the brutal beating of opposition members in Akhalkalaki, who have been released on bail.

We believe impunity breeds an atmosphere of violence, which threatens the peaceful, democratic process in the lead-up to the runoff presidential election.

For your consideration in coverage of the Georgian presidential election, I am passing along a summary of the latest poll from Edison Research - the only poll conducted since the first round of the presidential election. Though United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze finished about 1 point behind government-backed candidate Salome Zurabishvili in the first round according to official results, the new poll indicates a 12 percentage-point lead for Vashadze.

Several possible explanations for Vashadze's boost in support are noted in the memo attached. I have copied it below for your convenience. In the attached document, you can also find visualizations of the data and additional information about the polling firm and methodology. Please let me know if you have any questions.

2018 GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:

**NEW POLLING FROM EDISON RESEARCH SHOWS UNITED OPPOSITION
CANDIDATE OPENING UP LEAD OVER GOVERNMENT-BACKED CANDIDATE IN
RUNOFF, AMID WIDESPREAD DISSATISFACTION WITH DIRECTION OF COUNTRY**

November 15, 2018

TBILISI—Georgian television channel Rustavi 2 yesterday announced the results of the latest survey from U.S. polling firm Edison Research, which measures public opinion in advance of the runoff presidential election. The new poll indicates that support for United Opposition candidate

Grigol (Gregory) Vashadze has grown significantly: The opposition leader has opened up a 12-point lead over government-backed candidate Salome Zurbashvili.

If the runoff election were held today, 56% of voters would vote for Vashadze, while 44% would vote for Zurbashvili.^[i]

This is the first poll conducted since the first-round vote on October 28, when no candidate exceeded the 50% threshold required to win. Zurbashvili and Vashadze, the top two vote-getters, are advancing to the second round on November 28.

Since the first round, Vashadze's rating has increased significantly while Zurbashvili's remains relatively flat, for several reasons:

- Following Vashadze's strong result in the first round, the previously fragmented **pro-Western opposition has coalesced around the United Opposition to support Vashadze.**^[ii]
- The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, which is supporting Zurbashvili, had predicted an easy first-round victory. Thus, **Zurbashvili's campaign has faltered** in the lead-up to the second round, with the candidate avoiding public appearances for days at a time.^[iii]
- Popular disapproval of GD chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest individual who is also perceived as the most powerful, has risen precipitously. **A full 50% of respondents assess Ivanishvili's role in politics negatively, and only 13% positively.**
- Voters are largely dissatisfied with the overall conditions in the country under GD leadership: In this survey, **73% responded that Georgia is *not* developing in the right direction.**^[iv]
- GD has been embroiled in controversies following the first-round election, including **politically-motivated violence** against supporters of the United Opposition.^[v]

In recent weeks, several ruling party members have leveled unfounded accusations^[vi] against the United Opposition to manipulate public opinion. GD officials have claimed that Vashadze's coalition is plotting "revolutionary processes," and GD members have threatened "civil war" and "civil unrest" in the event of an opposition victory.^[vii]

Given Vashadze's widening lead over Zurabishvili, the ruling party's rhetoric is a transparent attempt at mobilizing voters through intimidation. An opposition candidate leading in the polls has every incentive to uphold and abide by free, fair, and peaceful democratic processes, as Vashadze has emphasized throughout his campaign.

[i] With full allocation; Link: <http://www.rustavi2.ge/en/news/118723>

[ii] <https://civil.ge/archives/262006>

[iii] <http://ajaratv.ge/news/en/35431/where-is-salome-zurabishvili--.html.html>

[iv] <http://www.rustavi2.ge/en/news/118734>

[v] JAM News

[vi] <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/117497?fbclid=IwAR1ZjHaS1dZ17hxIJn8hPlv5MU7uK9YpwHrVOAtm0u43Ft3iKfBagCGifk>

[vii] Tabula

VOTE-BUYING, EMPTY PROMISES, VIOLENCE & NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING:

Georgian government's electoral tool-box in the lead up to the runoff presidential election

Since the pre-election period, representatives of the Georgian government and ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party have used coercion, assault, hate-speech, and outsized political influence on electoral administration to support "independent" candidate Salome Zurabishvili and weaken United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze.²⁹³⁰³¹ Transparency International (TI) reported vote-buying and campaign law violations,³² and ODIHR confirmed mobilization by GD coordinators, raising concerns about citizens being able to vote without fear of retribution. Following Vashadze's strong performance in the first round on October 28, the government and GD escalated intimidation of the electorate, vote-buying/misuse of administrative resources³³, political violence, and negative campaigning/disinformation targeting the opposition.

Abuse of administrative resources for electoral gain: Following the first round, the government has announced multiple new programs amounting to millions in social spending. Most of these proposals target socially vulnerable citizens. TI condemned "electorally motivated public spending" and emphasized that "such programs should not be initiated in the period leading up to elections, since this gives a major unfair advantage to the ruling party."³⁴

- On November 19, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze announced that the debts of 600,000 people would be paid off by GD chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili's Bank Cartu. This is blatant vote-buying that

²⁹ available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

³⁰ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

³¹

<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/employees-non-profit-non-commercial-legal-entities-municipalities-are-possibly-instructed>

³² <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/statement-about-ongoing-electoral-process-0700-1300>

³³ https://gyla.ge/files/news/2006/First%20Interim%20Report_ENG.pdf

³⁴

<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/government-must-refrain-announcing-large-scale-social-programs-during-period-leading-second>

violates Article 164.1 of the Georgian Criminal Code, which prohibits the offering of financial benefits for electoral purposes.³⁵ However, neither the Chief Prosecutor's Office nor the State Audit Office has taken any meaningful action in response. Georgia's three largest electoral watchdogs—TI, ISFED, and GYLA—criticized the government's "unprecedented voter-bribing."³⁶

- On November 20, the same electoral watchdogs condemned the Public Service Development Agency for printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate electoral fraud, stating that such acts "call into question the legitimacy of the election."³⁷

This election cycle has seen intensification of government efforts to coerce public servants, socially vulnerable groups, and voters throughout the country into supporting Zurabishvili. There are approximately 200,000 public-sector employees in Georgia, about half of the total workforce. Given high unemployment, many are the sole breadwinners in their households and influence their relatives' votes; thus, they are targets of GD pressure. TV channel Rustavi 2 has broadcast a number of audio and video recordings as evidence of such coercion:

- On October 27, an undercover journalist approached Tbilisi street cleaners (municipal employees) and claimed to be from the mayor's office. The workers confirmed they had received orders to vote for Zurabishvili and to ensure their family members did the same.³⁸
- On November 17, Rustavi 2 aired footage of GD's "informal headquarters" in Gardabani, where a local businessman—armed with a gun—gives out groceries to voters who present their ID cards to be registered as Zurabishvili supporters.³⁹ The channel also aired footage of vote-buying.⁴⁰
- Rustavi 2 has also aired multiple reports of GD's unauthorized use of personal data from electoral commissions to mobilize voters, including by opening sealed voter lists. These incidents have occurred across the country, indicating the systemic nature of such mobilization.⁴¹
- In Samegrelo and Gardabani, GD is working with local criminal authorities to intimidate voters into supporting Zurabishvili. The Interior Ministry has reportedly ordered this coercion.⁴²

Political violence: The opposition has continuously criticized the government for failing to investigate and punish political violence for the past several years. The pattern of attacks on opposition, and impunity for ruling party members, has intensified in the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election. Serious physical assaults on opposition members have been reported in Kaspi⁴³, Marneuli⁴⁴, and two separate incidents in Akhalkalaki.⁴⁵ Rather than condemning violence and calling for justice, ruling party officials have endorsed this political violence and blamed the victims for "provoking" attacks.⁴⁶

Disinformation: The ODIHR interim report raised concerns about the "polarization" of Georgian media⁴⁷, and the government increased pressure on media critical of the ruling party in the pre-election period.⁴⁸ On October 24, the website of opposition-leaning Rustavi 2 was taken offline by DDoS attacks, hours after GD chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili told a Rustavi 2 journalist that the channel "will no longer have the opportunity to hinder the expression of differing opinions."⁴⁹ Instead of encouraging constructive

³⁵ <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1557168?publication=48>

³⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/266651>

³⁷ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1449/eng>

³⁸ <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/117176> (Georgian only)

³⁹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119033>

⁴⁰ <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/119021> (Georgian only)

⁴¹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/118969>

⁴² <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119184>; <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/119144>

⁴³ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

⁴⁴ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian), [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

⁴⁵ <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot>

⁴⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/263397>

⁴⁷ Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

⁴⁸ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/georgia-where-everything-old-is-maybe-new-again>

⁴⁹ <https://jam-news.net/?p=128375>

and factual reporting in line with ODIHR recommendations, the pro-government Imedi TV channel announced an “emergency broadcasting schedule” in the lead-up to the second round to “fight the return” of the opposition “regime.”⁵⁰ Imedi is a leading source of disinformation targeting the opposition:

- On November 5, Imedi aired one of many **fabricated reports** implying that “Russian agents” are working on Vashadze’s campaign. This report included a photo of Georgian citizen David Vashadze—the brother of campaign chief Giorgi Vashadze—with a caption falsely naming him as “Yevgeny Resheptev,” a Russian PR consultant.⁵¹
- In early November, Imedi aired a video of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, **cropped in an intentionally misleading manner** to imply that Saakashvili had taken responsibility for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. This clip was boosted on social media by **bots and pro-government trolling** pages.
- Internet “**troll farms**” have been deployed to attack the opposition and boost the ruling party on social media.

Hate speech, negative PR, and smear campaigns: Hate speech and polarization marred the pre-election environment, and they have intensified in the lead-up to the runoff, with an onslaught of negative PR targeting the opposition. On November 18, the chair of Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a major local election watchdog, criticized GD’s negative campaigning and warned of harmful consequences for Georgia’s democratic development.⁵²

- Concern from civil society comes as GD retains **Moshe Klughaft** and **Sefi Shaked**, two Israeli consultants infamous for utilizing negative PR and fabricated attacks to help nationalist/populist parties win elections.⁵³ In 2017, they were fined by Kosovo authorities for conducting “guerilla operations” aimed at misleading voters.⁵⁴
- In 2016, Klughaft helped the Social Democratic Party (PSD) win Romania’s parliamentary elections. At the European Parliament plenary on November 13, PSD MEP Victor Bostinaru made a false allegation about United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze, calling him a “Russian ambassador” who “would be unacceptable” as president.⁵⁵
- **Fake social media pages impersonating Vashadze/United Opposition have emerged**, including one Facebook page that claimed the opposition discriminates against women in politics. At the same time, as a coalition of women’s rights NGOs stated, GD has tried “to present [Zurabishvili] as a victim of gender-based discrimination, without...specific facts.”⁵⁶ The fake Facebook pages are reportedly connected to the GD PR consultants.⁵⁷
- **Alarming new campaign billboards have appeared across the country.** On many billboards, Zurabishvili’s image has been replaced by male leaders of GD, including Ivanishvili. The messages written on these billboards imply that the opposition is a “dictatorship” seeking “revenge.” Not only is this inappropriate, especially for an “independent” candidate, but the move has drawn further criticism from women’s groups, who stated that GD’s tactics “damage the ideals of gender equality and further marginalize female politicians”.⁵⁸
- Other billboards feature photos of Vashadze with Saakashvili and other former officials, as well as Rustavi 2 CEO Nika Gvaramia, with the message: “Say no to evil.” **In characterizing political opponents—and independent media representatives—as “evil,” GD crosses the line from**

⁵⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/262629>

⁵¹ Giorgi Vashadze ([Facebook](#))

⁵² <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119034>

⁵³ [Haaretz](#)

⁵⁴ [The Jerusalem Post](#)

⁵⁵ <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2394>

⁵⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/266236>

⁵⁷ <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/119023> (Georgian only)

⁵⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/266236>

negative campaigning to outright incitement. Such messages endanger democratic development and should draw condemnation from Georgia's international partners.

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UPDATE 23 NOVEMBER 2018

Background: The presidential election of 2018 will determine whether Georgia remains a promising democracy in a difficult region or succumbs fully to Russian influence. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, is the most powerful man in the country, yet holds no elected office and is unaccountable to the public. **Ivanishvili, who earned his fortune in Russia, has a known net worth of \$4.6 billion—equivalent to nearly a third of Georgia's GDP.**⁵⁹ Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's once-promising democracy resembles Russia's power vertical under Vladimir Putin. Transparency International recently expressed alarm at increasing "state capture."⁶⁰

Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in a pro-Western government in Georgia, the Kremlin has demonstrated escalating aggression in attempting to bring Georgia back under Russian control. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. Russia occupies 20% of Georgian territory to this day, in violation of ceasefire agreements. Beyond conventional warfare, the Russian government has also targeted Georgia with cyber-attacks, information operations, and propaganda to establish an exclusive sphere of influence over the region. Entities connected to the Russian government also fund political parties, extremist social movements, NGOs, and media outlets to bolster Russian soft power in Georgia.

Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay off in October 2012, when GD won the parliamentary elections. Georgia's westward trajectory has faltered since GD came to power. In February 2018, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats issued the DNI's Worldwide Threat Assessment, which highlighted serious concerns with the ruling party's propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and causing internal problems as Georgia continues to face external threats from Russia. High-level corruption, increased crime, economic stagnation, and a politicized justice system that "serves the interests of the ruling party" contribute to widespread popular discontent.⁶¹

The Georgian Dream-endorsed presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, is highly controversial and perceived as pro-Russian. Since 2008, Zurbishvili has repeatedly blamed the Georgian side—and occasionally, the U.S.⁶²—for Russia's invasion and occupation of Georgian territory. Indeed, Putin has quoted Zurbishvili's writing to support Russia's aggression in Georgia.⁶³ Zurbishvili's endorsements reflect her appeal to pro-Kremlin forces: The Russian-funded fringe party Alliance of Patriots endorsed her, warning that that a Vashadze victory would result in "bloodshed."⁶⁴ The Georgian March, a self-declared neo-Nazi group, has also voiced support for Zurbishvili.⁶⁵ Duma member Konstantin Kosachev, of Putin's United Russia party, stated that Russia will "carefully observe" the election and that an opposition victory would have "very unpleasant consequences."⁶⁶

⁵⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/#8c0b78445989>

⁶⁰ [Transparency International](https://www.transparency.org/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions)

⁶¹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions>

⁶² *L'Obs* ([French](#))

⁶³ In interview with [Le Figaro](#); Putin also quoted Zurbishvili on CNN to defend Russia's invasion of Georgia (28 August 2008)

⁶⁴ [Primetime News](#) (Georgian only)

⁶⁵ [Interpress News](#)

⁶⁶ <https://ria.ru/world/20181029/1531664100.html> (Russian only)

By contrast, United Opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze is popular among Georgians who desire closer ties with the West. As the Foreign Minister of Georgia from 2008 to 2012, under President Mikheil Saakashvili, Vashadze won full international support for Georgia's territorial integrity following the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁶⁷ Vashadze also built closer defense and security ties with the U.S.⁶⁸

The central messages of Vashadze's campaign, however, are economic—and his party's track record resonates with voters in a country with endemic poverty and unemployment. **Georgia's GDP quadrupled during the nine years of Saakashvili's presidency, but has been stagnant since GD came to power in 2012.**⁶⁹

Throughout the presidential campaign, government/GD officials have used coercion, vote-buying, hate-speech, and outsized political influence on electoral administration to support Zurabishvili and weaken Vashadze.⁷⁰⁷¹⁷² Following Vashadze's strong performance in the first round on October 28, the ruling party's violations have become more frequent—and more egregious—in the lead-up to the runoff on November 28.

Attempted election falsification: On November 20, Georgia's three most reputable civil society watchdogs—Transparency International, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)—reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, may be printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate electoral fraud. The watchdogs stated that the allegations “**call into question the legitimacy of the election.**”⁷³

Instead of fulfilling their duty and mandate to investigate the allegations, the Georgian authorities responded by lashing out at the civil society organizations that published the whistleblower's report. The Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into the case, but with a disclaimer that the NGOs had “withheld crucial information” by declining to identify the whistleblower. In fact, informant confidentiality is protected by Georgian law.⁷⁴ The day after the investigation began, Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani called the watchdogs' report a “lie” orchestrated by the opposition.⁷⁵

In response, 17 human rights NGOs released a statement characterizing the prosecution's demands as part of a “deliberate policy” of a government that “has long surpassed the limits” in its criticism of civil society groups. The **standoff between civil society and government over allegations of election falsification** is the latest in a string of incidents, in which government and ruling party officials have attacked NGOs with the intent to discredit civil society. On October 10, GD Speaker of Parliament Irakli

⁶⁷ <https://www.osce.org/cio/40615?download=true>

⁶⁸ https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_Foreign_Minister_Hopeful_About_Accord_With_US_/1368524.html

⁶⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/08/make-georgia-great-again/>

⁷⁰ available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

⁷¹ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

⁷²

<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/employees-non-profit-non-commercial-legal-entities-municipalities-are-possibly-instructed>

⁷³ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1449/eng>

⁷⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

⁷⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

Kobakhidze slammed NGOs as “accomplices of fascism.”⁷⁶ On October 23, GD chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili called electoral watchdogs “activists” of the political opposition.⁷⁷

When Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani attended the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting on November 21, several MEPs expressed alarm that the alleged election falsification scheme would “**undermine the credibility of the democratic system in Georgia**” and **breach the “fundamental values”** of the EU Association Agreement.⁷⁸ MEPs slammed the debt-relief announcement as an “**attempt to bribe the electorate**” and “a way to make citizens into hostages of the foundation run by the richest and most influential man in Georgia.”⁷⁹

Bribery, Vote-buying, Abuse of administrative resources for electoral gain: On November 19, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze announced that **the debts of 600,000 people would be paid off** by a foundation owned by Ivanishvili's Bank Cartu. This proposal violates the Georgian Criminal Code, which prohibits the offering of financial benefits for electoral purposes.⁸⁰ Transparency International, GYLA, and ISFED criticized the government's “**unprecedented voter-bribing**.”⁸¹ Neither the Chief Prosecutor's Office nor the State Audit Office has taken any meaningful action in response.

Following the first round, numerous instances of vote-buying have been reported across the country. Moreover, the government has announced multiple new programs amounting to millions in social spending. Transparency International has condemned “electorally motivated public spending” and emphasized that “such programs should not be initiated in the period leading up to elections, since this gives a major unfair advantage to the ruling party.”⁸²

Political violence and threats of “civil war”: A number of physical assaults have marred the 2018 presidential election cycle, and politically motivated violence has intensified in the lead-up to the second round. One of the most alarming incidents occurred in **Racha**⁸³ on November 21. Two men alleged to be GD supporters broke into the home of Nodar Burdiladze, head of the local campaign office for Vashadze, and stabbed him multiple times. Burdiladze suffered severe blood loss, underwent emergency surgery, and remains hospitalized in grave condition.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, the attack on Burdiladze was not an isolated incident. Since the first round election, opposition members have been assaulted in **Vejini**⁸⁵, **Bolnisi**⁸⁶, **Kaspi**⁸⁷, **Marneuli**⁸⁸, and **Akhalkalaki**, where five opposition supporters in two separate attacks were injured seriously enough to require sustained hospitalization.⁸⁹

⁷⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>

⁷⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

⁷⁸ [European Parliament - Video](#)

⁷⁹ [European Parliament - Video](#)

⁸⁰ <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1557168?publication=48>

⁸¹ <https://civil.ge/archives/266651>

⁸²

<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/government-must-refrain-announcing-large-scale-social-programs-during-period-leading-second>

⁸³ <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/119364>

⁸⁴ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119410>

⁸⁵ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119436>

⁸⁶ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119319>

⁸⁷ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

⁸⁸ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian), [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

⁸⁹ <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot>

Rather than condemning political violence and calling for justice, GD officials have blamed the victims for “provoking” the assaults.⁹⁰ Moreover, GD leaders are claiming that instability—and even “civil war”⁹¹—might break out in the event of an opposition victory. The threats of the ruling party not only intimidate the electorate but awaken a very real fear for many Georgians, who lived through an actual civil war in 1992-1993.

Though the authorities have opened investigations, the perpetrators—known GD supporters, some of whom are related to ruling party officials—are usually charged with insufficiently serious crimes (e.g., “hooliganism” instead of assault). Such impunity breeds an atmosphere of violence, which threatens the peaceful, democratic process.

Hate speech and demonization of the opposition exacerbate political tensions and threaten to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Billboards have appeared across the country describing the opposition as “Nazis” and “evil.”

With Georgia's first run-off election in history scheduled for this Wednesday, I am sending along a memo that offers context on the significance of the close contest, summarizes the most serious pre-election concerns and reported violations, and provides sources from local media / civil society organizations for your awareness and consideration.

Please feel free to share this information with anyone who may be interested in the situation in Georgia, and to contact me any time if you have further questions.

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UPDATE: 26 NOVEMBER 2018

Alarming developments before run-off include escalation of political violence, unprecedented voter-bribing, attempted election falsification, pressure on employees, and attacks on civil society and electoral watchdogs

Background: The presidential election of 2018 will determine whether Georgia remains a pro-Western democracy in a difficult region, or backslides and ultimately succumbs to Russian influence. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in a new era of democratic development in Georgia, the Kremlin has demonstrated escalating aggression in its attempts to bring Georgia back to Russian control. In August 2008, Russia in violation of international law, invaded Georgia. Russia occupies 20% of Georgian territory to this day. Beyond conventional warfare, the Russian government has also targeted Georgia with myriad cyber-attacks, ongoing information operations, and relentless streams of propaganda to draw Georgia into its exclusive sphere of influence. Entities connected to the Kremlin also fund political parties, extremist social movements, and media outlets to bolster Russian soft power in Georgia.

Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay off in October 2012, when oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (GD) won the parliamentary elections. Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's westward trajectory has faltered in the years since. This once-promising democracy has come to resemble Russia's power vertical under Vladimir Putin. Transparency International recently expressed alarm at

⁹⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/263397>

⁹¹ <https://jam-news.net/presidential-elections-in-georgia-why-is-the-ruling-party-talking-about-civil-war/>

increasing “state capture.”⁹² In February 2018, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats issued the DNI’s Worldwide Threat Assessment, which highlighted serious concerns with the ruling party’s propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and causing internal problems as Georgia continues to face external threats from Russia. High-level corruption, increased crime, economic stagnation, and a politicized justice system that “serves the interests of the ruling party” contribute to widespread popular discontent.⁹³

The GD-endorsed presidential candidate, **Salome Zurbishvili**, is widely perceived as pro-Russian. Zurbishvili has repeatedly blamed the Georgian side—and occasionally, the U.S.⁹⁴—for Russia’s invasion and occupation of Georgian territory. Putin himself has even quoted Zurbishvili’s writing to support Russian aggression in Georgia.⁹⁵ Zurbishvili’s endorsements reflect her appeal to pro-Kremlin forces: The Russian-funded fringe party Alliance of Patriots has endorsed her, threatening that an opposition victory would result in “bloodshed.”⁹⁶ Georgian March, a neo-Nazi group, has also voiced support for Zurbishvili.⁹⁷ Duma member Konstantin Kosachev, of Putin’s United Russia party, stated that Russia will “carefully observe” the election and that an opposition victory would have “very unpleasant consequences.”⁹⁸ Thus, the Putin playbook can be seen at work in Georgia: Support of extremist parties, backed by an oligarch, with a thin veneer of respectability in the form of a European fig leaf that has recourse to intimidation, lies, bribery, force and fraud.

By contrast, United Opposition candidate **Grigol Vashadze** is popular among Georgians who desire closer ties with the West. As the Foreign Minister of Georgia from 2008 to 2012, under President Mikheil Saakashvili, Vashadze won full international support for Georgia’s territorial integrity following the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁹⁹ Vashadze also built closer defense and security ties with the U.S.¹⁰⁰ The central messages of Vashadze’s campaign are economic—and his party’s track record resonates with voters in a country with endemic poverty and unemployment.

Throughout the presidential campaign, GD officials have used outright coercion, bribery and vote-buying, hate-speech, electoral fraud, and outsized political influence on electoral administration to support Zurbishvili and weaken Vashadze.¹⁰¹¹⁰²¹⁰³ Nevertheless, in the first round vote on October 28, GD experienced its first major electoral setback since coming to power in 2012. Zurbishvili won 39% to Vashadze’s 38%, falling short of GD’s expectations of a comfortable first-round victory. The third-largest opposition party (European Georgia, 11%) has since coalesced around Vashadze.

Given the opposition votes exceeding (at 61.36%) pro-government support on October 28th and the momentum from the strongest opposition performance since 2012, Vashadze has an advantage going into the second round. The latest polling (November 25, Edison Research) shows **a 4-point lead for Vashadze**, with a large proportion of respondents refusing to answer (these generally lean toward opposition, based on past experience). In a November 14 poll, 52% of respondents reported a “somewhat” or “very” negative view of Vashadze, but Zurbishvili’s negative rating was an unheard-of 70%.

⁹²[Transparency International](https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions)

⁹³ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions>

⁹⁴ *L’Obs* (French)

⁹⁵ In interview with *Le Figaro*; Putin quoted Zurbishvili on CNN to defend Russia’s invasion of Georgia (28 August 2008)

⁹⁶ *Primetime News* (Georgian only)

⁹⁷ *Interpress News*

⁹⁸ <https://ria.ru/world/20181029/1531664100.html> (Russian only)

⁹⁹ <https://www.osce.org/cio/40615?download=true>

¹⁰⁰ https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_Foreign_Minister_Hopeful_About_Accord_With_US_/1368524.html

¹⁰¹ available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369?download=true>

¹⁰² <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1427/eng/>

¹⁰³

<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/employees-non-profit-non-commercial-legal-entities-municipalities-are-possibly-instructed>

Several factors may explain Zurabishvili's weak performance in advance of the run-off election:

- Following Vashadze's strong result in the first round, the previously fragmented pro-Western opposition has coalesced around the United Opposition to support Vashadze's candidacy.
- GD had predicted an easy first-round victory. Thus, Zurabishvili's campaign has faltered in the lead-up to the second round, with the candidate avoiding public appearances for days at a time.
- Georgian Dream has been embroiled in controversies following the first-round election, including vote-buying, attempted fraud, and conflicts with civil society (elaborated below).

Following Vashadze's strong performance in the first round, the ruling party's violations have become more frequent—and more egregious—in the lead-up to the runoff on November 28.

Attempted election falsification: On November 20, Georgia's three most reputable civil society watchdogs—Transparency International, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)—reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, may be **printing and distributing fake identification cards** to facilitate electoral fraud. The watchdogs stated that the allegations “**call into question the legitimacy of the election**.”¹⁰⁴

Instead of fulfilling their duty and mandate to investigate the allegations, the Georgian authorities responded by lashing out at the civil society organizations that published the whistleblower's report. The Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into the case, but with a disclaimer that the NGOs had “withheld crucial information” by declining to identify the whistleblower. In fact, informant confidentiality is protected by Georgian law.¹⁰⁵ The day after the investigation began, Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani called the watchdogs' report a “lie” orchestrated by the opposition.¹⁰⁶

In response, 17 human rights NGOs released a statement characterizing the prosecution's demands as part of a “deliberate policy” of a government that “has long surpassed the limits” in its criticism of civil society groups. The **standoff between civil society and government over allegations of election falsification** is the latest in a string of incidents, in which government and ruling party officials have attacked NGOs with the intent to discredit civil society and impose uniform discourse on the public square.

- On October 10, GD Speaker of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze slammed NGOs as “accomplices of fascism.”¹⁰⁷
- On October 23, GD chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili called electoral watchdogs “activists” of the political opposition.¹⁰⁸

Bribery, Vote-buying, Abuse of administrative resources for electoral gain: On November 19, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze announced that **the debts of 600,000 people would be paid off** by a foundation owned by Ivanishvili's Bank Cartu. This proposal violates the Georgian Criminal Code, which prohibits the offering of financial benefits for electoral purposes.¹⁰⁹ Transparency International, GYLA, and ISFED criticized the government's “**unprecedented voter-bribing**.”¹¹⁰ Neither the Chief Prosecutor's Office nor the State Audit Office has taken any meaningful action in response.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1449/eng>

¹⁰⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹⁰⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹⁰⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>

¹⁰⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

¹⁰⁹ <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1557168?publication=48>

¹¹⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/266651>

When Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani attended the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting on November 21, several MEPs expressed alarm that the alleged election falsification scheme would “**undermine the credibility of the democratic system in Georgia**” and **breach the “fundamental values”** of the EU Association Agreement.¹¹¹ MEPs also slammed the debt-relief announcement as an “**attempt to bribe the electorate**” and “a way to **make citizens into hostages** of the foundation run by the richest and most influential man in Georgia.”¹¹²

Pressure and coercion of public sector workers, and the broader misuse of administrative resources, was a widely reported problem during the first round of the presidential elections in Georgia. The number of **documented** instances of such pressure has increased in the run up to the second round, in both the public and private sectors. On November 24, Rustavi 2 reported that the director of a major shopping center in Tbilisi pressured hundreds of his employees to submit copies of their IDs, addresses, and contact information to the administration of the center. Reportedly, this exercise is aimed at coercing employees to vote for Zurabishvili, or face job loss.¹¹³ The same practice was reported in one of the most popular Tbilisi Restaurant chains, Tsisqvili, where hundreds of employees faced a categorical demand by the management to ensure their own and their family members’ votes go to Zurabishvili or face retaliation in the form of job loss.¹¹⁴

More reports of coercing public service employees continue to emerge. In a recent investigative report, Rustavi 2 exposed a coercion scheme of the Tbilisi municipal cleaning service, which employs hundreds of people. Number of employees confirmed pressure to vote for Zurabishvili. This report adds to other documented instances of coercing public servants in this election cycle. Given Georgia’s high rate of unemployment, the majority of workers are the sole breadwinners in their households, and GD attempts to exploit many workers’ precarious financial situations to influence their relatives’ votes. In an election that ODIHR has already criticized as being held on an “uneven playing field,” such coercion is unconscionable and must draw scrutiny and condemnation from Georgia’s international partners.

Political violence and threats of “civil war”: A number of physical assaults have marred the 2018 presidential election cycle thus far and more is sure to come. Politically motivated violence has ratcheted up, and intensified in the lead-up to the second round. A recent alarming incident occurred in **Racha**¹¹⁵ on November 21. Two men alleged to be GD supporters broke into the home of Nodar Burdiladze, head of the local campaign office for Vashadze, and stabbed him multiple times. Burdiladze suffered severe blood loss, underwent emergency surgery, and remains hospitalized in grave condition.¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, the attack on Burdiladze was not an isolated incident. Since the first round, opposition members have been assaulted in **Vejini**¹¹⁷, **Bolnisi**¹¹⁸, **Kaspi**¹¹⁹, **Marneuli**¹²⁰, and **Akhalkalaki**, where five people in two separate attacks were injured seriously enough to require sustained hospitalization.¹²¹ Over the past week, opposition supporters in **Rustavi** and **Racha** have also reported **Molotov cocktails** being thrown onto their property.¹²²

¹¹¹ [European Parliament - Video](#)

¹¹² [European Parliament - Video](#)

¹¹³ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119513>

¹¹⁴ “Administration of Tsiskvili Restaurants Forcing Employees to Support Zurabishvili” [Rustavi2](#) (In Georgian)

¹¹⁵ <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/119364>

¹¹⁶ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119410>

¹¹⁷ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119436>

¹¹⁸ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/119319>

¹¹⁹ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

¹²⁰ [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian), [Rustavi 2](#) (Georgian)

¹²¹ <https://jam-news.net/five-opposition-activists-assaulted-in-a-week-as-georgias-javakheti-region-turns-into-political-hotspot>

¹²² “Molotov Cocktail Thrown into Home of Grigol Vashadze’s Supporter in Rustavi” [Reginfo](#) (In Georgian)

Rather than condemning political violence and calling for justice, GD officials have blamed the victims for “provoking” the assaults.¹²³ Moreover, GD leaders are claiming that instability—and even “civil war”¹²⁴—might break out in the event of an opposition victory. The threats of the ruling party not only intimidate the electorate but awaken a very real fear for many Georgians, who lived through an actual civil war in 1992-1993. Though the authorities have opened investigations, the perpetrators—known GD supporters, some of whom are related to ruling party officials—are usually charged with insufficiently serious crimes (e.g., “hooliganism” instead of assault). Such impunity breeds an atmosphere of violence, which threatens the peaceful, democratic process.

Hate speech and demonization of the opposition exacerbate political tensions, push the discourse in directions of extreme polarization and threaten to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Billboards have appeared across the country with images of the faces of the opposition—as well as the CEO of Rustavi 2, an independent TV station that has criticized the government—described as “Nazis” and “evil.” The sad spectacle of the ruling party resorting to force and fraud, demonization, lies, violence and intimidation is in direct proportion to their lack of any positive program or policy vision for the improvement of Georgian society—and the panicked fear of their oligarchic benefactor that the freedom-loving spirit of the Georgian people will succeed in breaking one-man rule. Thus, the government has shown willingness in recent days to violate any and all red lines. **Georgia deserves better. And Georgia’s international partners owe them their support in achieving it.**

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UPDATE: 27 NOVEMBER 2018

Appearance of 10,000+ suspicious new voter registrations in the two weeks following the first-round election suggests possible preparations for electoral fraud

After opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze’s strong performance in the first round of the Georgian presidential election on October 28, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has intensified efforts to mobilize support for government-backed candidate Salome Zurbishvili. In the lead-up to the runoff election on November 28, civil society leaders have raised alarm that GD may be preparing to commit electoral fraud. Recently discovered irregularities in voter rolls could be used to facilitate election falsification.

On November 20, Georgia’s three most reputable electoral watchdogs—Transparency International, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA)—reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, may be **printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate vote falsification**. According to an anonymous whistleblower employed at the PSDA, each voter may use the fake IDs to cast up to five votes for Zurbishvili at various precincts around the country.¹²⁵ The watchdogs stated the allegations “call into question the legitimacy of the election.”¹²⁶

Instead of fulfilling their mandate to conduct a timely and fair investigation, so that voters and observers could have as much information as possible before the second round, the relevant **authorities responded by criticizing the civil society organizations that published the report**. The Prosecutor’s Office launched an investigation into the case, but with a disclaimer that the CSOs had “withheld crucial

¹²³ <https://civil.ge/archives/263397>

¹²⁴ <https://jam-news.net/presidential-elections-in-georgia-why-is-the-ruling-party-talking-about-civil-war/>

¹²⁵ <http://oc-media.org/georgian-government-printing-fake-id-cards-for-election-fraud/>

¹²⁶ <http://www.isfed.ge/main/1449/eng>

information” by declining to identify the informant. However, Georgian law protects the confidentiality of whistleblowers who wish to remain anonymous.¹²⁷

The day after the investigation began—before any findings had been announced—Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani decried the watchdogs’ report as a “lie” fabricated by the United Opposition.¹²⁸ Tsulukiani provided no evidence to support her claim. The **standoff between civil society and the government over allegations of election falsification** is the latest in a string of incidents in which GD officials have publicly derided CSO electoral watchdogs as “political activists”¹²⁹ and even “accomplices of fascism.”¹³⁰

Such a scheme would require the falsification of voter rolls, so that the fake identities would be reflected in voter registrations at the precincts involved. The United Opposition has been examining Georgia’s voter rolls to detect any such irregularities in advance of the closely contested runoff—and has discovered **over 10 000 new voter registrations** that cannot be explained due to usual external factors.

- Between October 2016 and October 2018, Georgia’s voter list remained nearly unchanged. The voter list in the first round of the presidential election on October 28 included 3 504 082 registrations, just **53 fewer** than the national voter list two years earlier. (It is worth noting that Georgia’s entire population is estimated at 3 500 000 to 3 700 000—meaning the voter rolls were already significantly inflated in the first round).
- However, in the two weeks following Zurabishvili’s failure to win the first round of the election, the total number of voter registrations **increased by about 10,000**.
- Controlling for external factors, we found that there are 14 649 unique persons registered to vote in the runoff, who were absent from the first-round voter rolls. Of these new voters, 3551 turned 21 in the past month, making them eligible to vote. **But the remaining 11 098 appeared suddenly, with no clear explanation.**
- These 11 098 new registrations have never appeared on voter rolls at all, implying that they are individuals without IDs. However, the age distribution of these new registrants implies otherwise; many are working-age. It is highly unlikely that such individuals would not have been registered to vote in the first round, since all Georgian citizens *must* have ID cards to attend university, apply for jobs, open bank accounts, get mobile phone service, and other necessities. Thus, it is possible that the new registrations are fabricated identities to coincide with the fake IDs reportedly being issued through PSDA.
- If the 11 098 new registrations are part of an election falsification scheme, we would expect them to appear in precincts where Zurabishvili underperformed in the first round. In fact, the suspicious registrations are spread out across the country, perhaps to avoid triggering red flags from observers.
- However, there are 46 precincts with more than 10 new registrations added. We urge observers to ensure that these polling stations are closely monitored:
 - Some such precincts are in Tbilisi, where Zurabishvili underperformed: Saburtalo (16, 90, 91), Isani (22, 33, 38, 71, 74), Samgori (51, 61, 73, 89, 100, 113, 118), Chugureti (10, 24, 27, 39), Nadzaladevi (5, 17, 20, 32, 82), Gldani (24, 54, 70, 84, 97, 106, 108)
 - Other precincts are in rural and minority areas, where numerous violations were reported in the first round: Gurjaani, Marneuli, Rustavi, Lagodekhi, Akhmeta, Mtskheta, Kareli, Tsaltubo, and Martvili.

¹²⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹²⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹²⁹ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>

¹³⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

Hope all is well with you. I am sharing an updated post election memo that includes **accreditation from impartial observer missions** and CSOs wherever possible, so that it is clear this is not just the United Opposition questioning the legitimacy of the runoff.

In addition, I tried to highlight the information that directly contradicts GD's claims on some controversial issues raised by MEPs in the AFET meeting with Foreign Minister Zalkaliani on 21 Nov, namely:

- So called **"debt relief" for 600,000 people was not a legitimate public policy decision**, because it was promised by the private financial institution of the ruling party chairman a week before the runoff.
- **Holding the election on a weekday was a political decision**, overtly announced by ruling party (Kaladze) prior to CESKO statement, and resulted in significantly fewer int'l observers. Off the record, but I heard this from an EP observer in Tbilisi on the eve of the runoff, that their delegation was just 25% the size of the first round delegation. And he blamed the weekday election for this, implying it was one goal of the ruling party to get fewer observers from international missions.
- **The CSO's report on fake IDs issued by PSDA appears to have been proven correct in the runoff**. Although GD letter claimed that the allegations concerned PSDA locations in a couple of rural areas, in fact **fake IDs were used in Vake precincts** during the runoff, so those voters would have obtained the IDs from the central agency I assume? Also, I noted that NDI mission directly observed multiple voting and that the voter rolls were inflated by about 3500 legitimate voters (all people who turned 21 in November...) but the **total increase to voter rolls was at least 15,000**. Meaning 11,000+ suspicious and unexplained - on top of the already inflated voter-rolls in Georgia.

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UPDATE: 30 NOVEMBER 2018

Following critical assessments of systemic falsification, manipulation, and voter intimidation, the United Opposition challenges the legitimacy of the run-off presidential election

November 28th presidential run-off election was marred by serious violations, including systemic vote-buying, violence, voter coercion/pressure, multiple voting, observer expulsions from voting precincts and widespread violation of the right to vote secrecy. Voting followed a pre-election period during which leading local watchdogs raised concerns about **"unprecedented voter bribery"**¹³¹ and allegations that a government agency printed fake IDs to facilitate election fraud, which "could irreparably damage the election environment and **challenge the legitimacy of the elections**"¹³².

¹³¹ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

¹³² <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/archevnebis-savaraudo-gayalbebis-faqtze-gamodzieba-unda-daitsyos#sthash.UKuC6JBD.dpbs>

The pre-election period was also marred by **attacks on opposition supporters, hate speech, and demonization** of the opposition. These issues were noted in the reports of international observation missions. According to NDI's assessment on November 29, the lead-up to the runoff was "divisive and marked by violence and intimidation."¹³³ Amid widespread vote-buying and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party—as well as direct observation of multiple voting and manipulation of the vote count—NDI warned that **Georgia risks "squandering" its hard-won democratic governance.**

The ODIHR preliminary assessment noted similar disturbing trends in the pre-election environment and serious violations on E-Day, stating that the ruling party's misuse of state resources "**blurred the line between party and state.**"¹³⁴ ODIHR concluded that the insufficient regulation of the second round "**did not provide legal certainty.**"¹³⁵ Due in part to the government's decision—unduly influenced by the ruling party¹³⁶—to hold the runoff on a weekday, despite criticism from electoral watchdogs and opposition, the **ODIHR observation mission was significantly smaller than in the first round.**

In the lead-up to the runoff, Georgia's three most reputable electoral watchdogs, led by Transparency International, reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, was **printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate vote falsification.**¹³⁷ Instead of fulfilling their mandate to conduct a timely and impartial investigation, the **authorities responded by criticizing the CSOs that published the report.** Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani called the allegations "lies" fabricated by the opposition, because the CSOs (acting in accordance with Georgian law¹³⁸) declined to identify the whistleblower.¹³⁹ This was the latest in a string of pre-election incidents in which officials attempted to discredit CSOs/electoral watchdogs.¹⁴⁰

The alleged electoral fraud scheme required the falsification of voter lists (VLs), allowing one individual to vote up to five times for the ruling candidate. The abrupt inflation of VLs in the month before the second round (by about 15,000 voters, of which 11,000+ could not be legitimately accounted for by e.g. individuals reaching legal voting age in that time frame) raised further suspicions of electoral manipulation to benefit the ruling party. On E-Day, multiple voting/carousel voting was noted by observers in PECs throughout Georgia, through the recurrent use of inked voters, pre-filled ballot papers, and **fake IDs**—which were used to vote in 2 precincts in central Tbilisi (Vake #2, #14) indicating that **they came from the central PSDA rather than isolated incidents.**

Numerous other violations were noted at PECs across the country. The most serious trends include:

- **Vote-buying:** The week before the runoff, the Prime Minister promised to write off the "bad loans" of 600,000 citizens through Cartu Bank—owned by the billionaire ruling party chairman—which Transparency International criticized as "unprecedented voter bribery." The ODIHR preliminary assessment amplified this criticism, noting that the **debt-relief plan was not a legitimate public policy decision**, but rather an attempt to influence the outcome of the election backed by a "**private financial institution linked to the chairman of the ruling party.**" In addition, ruling party coordinators distributed food products and cash on a massive scale throughout Georgia, targeting disadvantaged communities (ethnic minorities, IDPs) and asking for voters' IDs to ensure they would cast ballots for the ruling party. On E-Day, ruling party coordinators distributed cash in virtually every

¹³³ [LINK TO NDI ASSESSMENT](#)

¹³⁴ [LINK TO ODIHR PRELIM](#)

¹³⁵ [LINK TO ODIHR PRELIM](#)

¹³⁶ Ruling party official Kakha Kaladze announced the runoff date hours before the Central Election Committee.

¹³⁷ <http://oc-media.org/georgian-government-printing-fake-id-cards-for-election-fraud/>

¹³⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹³⁹ <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹⁴⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>; <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

municipality of Georgia, and many of these incidents (outside PECs) were caught on video and reported to the United Opposition website.

- **Observer expulsions/violence:** dozens of opposition proxies, as well as NGO observers were illegally expelled from PECs—and sometimes assaulted—as a response to their efforts to report election violations.
- **Voter control, intimidation and coercion:** Ruling party coordinators unlawfully utilized voters' lists with photographic identification and personal data to mobilize voters at precincts throughout the country. This widespread practice represented an unprecedented lever of control over public sector workers and their family members, and amounted to election falsification due to its large-scale influence on the free will of the voters. While also reported by OSCE/ODIHR in the first round, government efforts to coerce and intimidate voters intensified significantly. Local criminal authorities were heavily involved alongside ruling party coordinators. The ODIHR preliminary assessment raised serious concerns about voter intimidation in the runoff, calling into question the freedom of voters to cast ballots without “fear of retribution” in line with Council of Europe and international standards.

Results: At closing of precincts on E-Day, independent broadcaster Rustavi 2 announced exit polls conducted by Edison Research, with the government-backed candidate, Salome Zurbashvili coming in at 55% and the opposition candidate, Grigol Vashadze - at 45%. At noon November 29th, with 3694 PECs counted by the CEC, the result stands at 59.52% and 40.48%. Notably, Vashadze won decisively in all electoral precincts abroad, where government levers of control—intimidation and bribery—could not be exercised.

This preliminary result comes in face of widespread violations summarized above, which significantly limited the ability of Georgian voters to cast their vote in secret, free of fear or undue influence. The United Opposition presidential candidate met with several thousand supporters on 29 November 2018 and reiterated the opposition's position that the election was illegitimate due to the systemic and unprecedented violations noted above. The opposition has announced a peaceful demonstration, to protest election falsification and to demand snap presidential and parliamentary elections, which will take place in Tbilisi's Freedom Square on Sunday, December 2.

Email to U.S. State Dept Caucasus Desk officers, December 5, 2018

Hello Toby and Thomas,

Do you have any availability tomorrow between 11:30 and 1:30 to meet and discuss the post-election environment in Georgia? I just returned yesterday, following 5 weeks in-country including election observation, and had a few points of concern I'd like to raise with you if possible.

Namely, since the government's candidate declared victory on November 28, we have seen:

- Instances of violence and hate-speech against opposition figures, which ruling party officials have not denounced (in fact some have endorsed)
- Revelation that over 100,000 ballots were invalidated, significantly higher than in any Georgian election since 2004. The ballots themselves show coercion, because many had Zurabishvili's name circled (so the voter could take a photo as "proof" for their boss) and then scratched out, showing intention to vote for Vashadze
- Evidence that fake IDs were used in carousel voting (the IDs were found a few days after the runoff)
- The opposition's stated plans to protest and call for snap elections; some concerns and predictions for different scenarios

I'll have a memo with more specifics, but wanted to note the main concerns as a rough agenda. Thanks again for your time.

Kind regards,
Christina Pushaw

10 December 2018

OPPOSITION CHALLENGES VALIDITY OF GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION *With systemic falsification, manipulation, and voter intimidation noted by international and local observers, as well as further evidence of electoral fraud that has surfaced following the second-round vote, the United Opposition is challenging the result of the presidential election as illegitimate and pursuing legal recourse to annul the result.*

Executive Summary

Following the first-round vote on October 28, United Opposition presidential candidate Grigol Vashadze trailed government-backed candidate Salome Zurabishvili by a very slim margin—about one percentage point. With the third-place finisher, David Bakradze of European Georgia who won more than 10%, endorsing Vashadze in the runoff, the opposition candidate entered the second-round campaign with a notable advantage. Regional expert Thomas de Waal on November 5 called Vashadze the “clear favorite to win the second round,” and noted that it would be very difficult for Zurabishvili to find the 250,000+ additional votes necessary to win the runoff.¹

However, the November 28th presidential run-off election ended with a highly improbable result: Zurabishvili won 59.52% to Vashadze's 40.48%.² How did the ruling Georgian Dream party compensate for Zurabishvili's disadvantages? The second round was marred by violations on a scale not seen since 2003, including vote-buying, political violence, voter coercion and pressure by employers and criminal authorities, multiple voting, expulsions of observers and opposition commission members from voting precincts, and widespread violation of the right to

ballot secrecy. Due to the serious and systemic nature of these violations, the United Opposition did not accept the result of the election. In the days following the run-off, more evidence of widespread electoral fraud emerged, including the **use of fake IDs to facilitate multiple voting** for Zurabishvili. These developments reinforced the United Opposition's decision to challenge the result of the election in court, and in parallel, to demand snap parliamentary elections.

Critical assessments of local and international observers

The problematic second-round vote followed a pre-election period during which leading local watchdogs raised concerns about **"unprecedented voter bribery"**³ and allegations that a government agency printed fake IDs to facilitate election fraud, which "could irreparably damage the election environment and **challenge the legitimacy of the elections.**"⁴ The pre election period was also marred by **attacks on opposition supporters, hate speech, and demonization** of the opposition. According to NDI's assessment on November 29, the lead-up to the runoff was "divisive and marked by violence and intimidation."⁵ After directly observing multiple voting and manipulation of the vote count, among other serious violations, NDI warned that **Georgia risks "squandering" its hard-won democratic governance.**⁶

The ODIHR preliminary assessment noted similar disturbing trends in the pre-election environment and serious violations on E-Day, stating that the ruling party's misuse of state resources **"blurred the line between party and state."**⁷ ODIHR concluded that insufficient regulation of the runoff **"did not provide legal certainty."**⁸ Due in part to the government's decision—unduly influenced by the ruling party⁹—to hold the runoff on a weekday, despite criticism from electoral watchdogs and opposition, the **international observation missions were significantly smaller than in the first round.**

Use of fake IDs to facilitate electoral fraud

In the lead-up to the runoff, Georgia's three most reputable electoral watchdogs reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, was **printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate vote falsification.**¹⁰ The alleged electoral fraud scheme required the **falsification of voter lists (VLs)**, allowing one individual to vote up to five times for the ruling candidate. The abrupt inflation of VLs in the month before the second round (by about 15,000 voters, of which 11,000+ could not be legitimately accounted for) raised further suspicions of electoral manipulation to benefit the ruling party.

- On E-Day, multiple voting/carousel voting was noted by observers in PECs throughout Georgia, through the recurrent use of inked voters, pre-filled ballot papers, and **fake IDs**—which were noted by observers in 2 precincts in central Tbilisi (Vake #2, #14) indicating that **they came from the central PSDA.**

¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/05/when-georgians-go-low-other-georgians-go-lower-election/>

² <http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

³ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

⁴ <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/archevnebis-savaraudo-gayalbebis-faqtze-gamodzieba-unda-dai-tsyoos#sthash.UKuC6JBD.dpbs> ⁵ [NDI Statement](#), 29 November 2018

⁶ [NDI Statement](#), 29 November 2018

⁷ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ⁹ Ruling party official Kakha Kaladze announced the runoff date hours before the Central Election Committee.

¹⁰ <http://oc-media.org/georgian-government-printing-fake-id-cards-for-election-fraud/>

- Several days **after the run-off, a cache of fake IDs was discovered** in Lanchkhuti, laminated

for use in multiple voting. The identities were of deceased people, whose names were still on the inflated VLs.¹¹

- Instead of fulfilling their mandate to conduct a timely and impartial investigation, the authorities responded by criticizing the civil society organizations (CSOs) that published the report.¹² This was the latest in a string of pre-election incidents in which ruling party officials attempted to discredit CSOs/electoral watchdogs.¹³

Numerous other violations were noted across the country. The most serious trends included: •

Vote-buying: The week before the runoff, the Prime Minister promised to write off the “bad loans” of 600,000 citizens through Cartu Bank—owned by the billionaire ruling party chairman—which Transparency International criticized as “unprecedented voter bribery.”¹⁴ The ODIHR preliminary assessment amplified this criticism, noting that the debt relief plan was not a legitimate public policy decision, but rather an attempt to influence the outcome of the election backed by a “private financial institution linked to the chairman of the ruling party.”¹⁵

- In addition, ruling party coordinators distributed food products and cash on a massive scale throughout Georgia, targeting disadvantaged communities (ethnic minorities, IDPs) and asking for voters’ IDs.
- On E-Day, ruling party coordinators distributed cash in virtually every municipality.

Many such incidents outside PECs were filmed and photographed and will be used in the United

Opposition’s legal challenge. • **Observer expulsions/assault/political violence:** Dozens of opposition proxies, as well as observers, were illegally expelled from PECs and in some cases assaulted—to prevent reporting of violations. The day after the election, opposition leader Tako Charkviani and her husband were assaulted by a group of men in Kutaisi. Charkviani linked the attack to her political activity. At least one of the attackers was a government official of the ruling party.¹⁶ • **Voter control, intimidation and coercion:** While also reported by OSCE/ODIHR in the first round, government efforts to coerce and intimidate voters intensified significantly.

- Ruling party coordinators unlawfully utilized voters’ lists with photographic identification and personal data at precincts throughout the country. This practice represented an unprecedented lever of control over public sector workers and amounted to election falsification due to its large-scale influence on voters’ free will.
- Following E-Day, a number of improperly invalidated ballots appeared to confirm such coercion of voters. The ballots had Zurabishvili’s name circled—presumably so the voter could take a photo of his/her ballot to show to employers or authorities as proof of supporting the ruling party—and then scratched out, with Vashadze’s name ultimately circled. Such ballots should not have been invalidated, since they show clear voter intent. Moreover, the existence of such ballots is evidence voters’ right to secrecy was violated.
- On 8 December, Ia Kerzaia, the principal of a Zugdidi public school who supported the opposition, died from complications of a stroke. Kerzaia’s son alleges that overwhelming pressure from the ruling party—which has been reported to target public school employees nationwide—contributed to her sudden death.¹⁷
- Local criminal authorities were heavily involved alongside ruling party coordinators. The ODIHR preliminary assessment raised serious concerns about voter intimidation in the runoff, calling into question the freedom of voters to cast ballots without “fear of retribution” in line with Council of Europe and international standards.¹⁸
- Notably, Vashadze won decisively (64.24%) in all electoral precincts abroad, where government levers of control—intimidation and bribery—could not be

exercised.¹⁹

United Opposition Response

The ruling party has claimed a decisive victory for Zurabishvili despite the widespread violations summarized above, which infringed on the fundamental right of Georgian voters to cast their vote in secret, free of fear or undue influence. The United Opposition has organized peaceful demonstrations and announced a criminal case against ruling party officials for voter bribery.²⁰ Outgoing president Giorgi Margvelashvili criticized the electoral violations and noted that the opposition's protest movement is a legitimate part of the democratic process.²¹ Despite the significant popular support for the opposition's demands, including snap elections to restore legitimacy and changes to electoral legislation to promote proportionality, the government has categorically refused to negotiate with the opposition.²²

¹¹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120235>

¹² <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹³ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>; <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

¹⁴ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

¹⁵ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ¹⁶

<http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120143>

¹⁷ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120816>

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ¹⁹

<http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

²⁰ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120770>

²¹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120219>

²² <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120220>

Email to Paul Massaro, US-Helsinki Commission staff member, December 5, 2018

Hi Paul, do you have time for a late lunch on Friday, or a coffee around 2:30? Would be great to compare notes about Georgia and discuss the election, as well as some issues that may be of interest to you regarding the post-election environment.

-Christina

Attached memo:

10 December 2018

OPPOSITION CHALLENGES VALIDITY OF GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION *With systemic falsification, manipulation, and voter intimidation noted by international and local observers, as well as further evidence of electoral fraud that has surfaced following the second-round vote, the United Opposition is challenging the result of the presidential election as illegitimate and pursuing legal recourse to annul the result.*

Executive Summary

Following the first-round vote on October 28, United Opposition presidential candidate Grigol Vashadze trailed government-backed candidate Salome Zurbishvili by a very slim margin—about one percentage point. With the third-place finisher, David Bakradze of European Georgia who won more than 10%, endorsing Vashadze in the runoff, the opposition candidate entered the second-round campaign with a notable advantage. Regional expert Thomas de Waal on November 5 called Vashadze the “clear favorite to win the second round,” and noted that it would be very difficult for Zurbishvili to find the 250,000+ additional votes necessary to win the runoff.¹

However, the November 28th presidential run-off election ended with a highly improbable result—Zurbishvili won 59.52% to Vashadze’s 40.48%.² How did the ruling Georgian Dream party compensate for Zurbishvili’s disadvantages? The second round was marred by **violations on a scale not seen since 2003**, including vote-buying, political violence, voter coercion and pressure by employers and criminal authorities, multiple voting, expulsions of observers and opposition commission members from voting precincts, and widespread violation of the right to ballot secrecy. Due to the serious and systemic nature of these violations, the United Opposition did not accept the result of the election. In the days following the run-off, more evidence of widespread electoral fraud emerged, including the **use of fake IDs to facilitate multiple voting** for Zurbishvili. These developments reinforced the United Opposition’s decision to challenge the result of the election in court, and in parallel, to demand snap parliamentary elections.

Critical assessments of local and international observers

The problematic second-round vote followed a pre-election period during which leading local watchdogs raised concerns about “**unprecedented voter bribery**”³ and allegations that a government agency printed fake IDs to facilitate election fraud, which “could irreparably damage the election environment and **challenge the legitimacy of the elections.**”⁴ The pre election period was also marred by **attacks on opposition supporters, hate speech, and demonization** of the opposition. According to NDI’s assessment on November 29, the lead-up to the runoff was “divisive and marked by violence and intimidation.”⁵ After directly observing multiple voting and manipulation of the vote count, among other serious violations, NDI warned that **Georgia risks “squandering” its hard-won democratic governance.**⁶

The ODIHR preliminary assessment noted similar disturbing trends in the pre-election environment and serious violations on E-Day, stating that the ruling party’s misuse of state

resources “**blurred the line between party and state.**”⁷ ODIHR concluded that insufficient regulation of the runoff “**did not provide legal certainty.**”⁸ Due in part to the government’s decision—unduly influenced by the ruling party⁹—to hold the runoff on a weekday, despite criticism from electoral watchdogs and opposition, the **international observation missions were significantly smaller than in the first round.**

Use of fake IDs to facilitate electoral fraud

In the lead-up to the runoff, Georgia’s three most reputable electoral watchdogs reported that the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, was **printing and distributing fake identification cards to facilitate vote falsification.**¹⁰ The alleged electoral fraud scheme required the **falsification of voter lists (VLs)**, allowing one individual to vote up to five times for the ruling candidate. The abrupt inflation of VLs in the month before the second round (by about 15,000 voters, of which 11,000+ could not be legitimately accounted for) raised further suspicions of electoral manipulation to benefit the ruling party.

- On E-Day, multiple voting/carousel voting was noted by observers in PECs throughout Georgia, through the recurrent use of inked voters, pre-filled ballot papers, and **fake IDs**—which were noted by observers in 2 precincts in central Tbilisi (Vake #2, #14) indicating that **they came from the central PSDA.**

¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/05/when-georgians-go-low-other-georgians-go-lower-election/>

² <http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

³ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

⁴ <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/archevnebis-savaraudo-gayalbebis-faqtze-gamodzieba-unda-dai-tsyes#sthash.UKuC6JBD.dpbs> ⁵ [NDI Statement](#), 29 November 2018

⁶ [NDI Statement](#), 29 November 2018

⁷ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ⁹ Ruling party official Kakha Kaladze announced the runoff date hours before the Central Election Committee.

¹⁰ <http://oc-media.org/georgian-government-printing-fake-id-cards-for-election-fraud/>

- Several days **after the run-off, a cache of fake IDs was discovered** in Lanchkhuti, laminated for use in multiple voting. The identities were of deceased people, whose names were still on the inflated VLs.¹¹
- Instead of fulfilling their mandate to conduct a timely and impartial investigation, the authorities responded by criticizing the civil society organizations (CSOs) that published the report.¹² This was the latest in a string of pre-election incidents in which ruling party officials attempted to discredit CSOs/electoral watchdogs.¹³

Numerous other violations were noted across the country. The most serious trends included: •

Vote-buying: The week before the runoff, the Prime Minister promised to write off the “bad loans” of 600,000 citizens through Cartu Bank—owned by the billionaire ruling party chairman—which Transparency International criticized as “**unprecedented voter bribery.**”¹⁴ The ODIHR preliminary assessment amplified this criticism, noting that the debt relief plan was not a legitimate public policy decision, but rather an attempt to influence the outcome of the election backed by a “**private financial institution linked to the chairman of the ruling party.**”¹⁵

- In addition, ruling party coordinators distributed food products and cash on a massive scale throughout Georgia, targeting disadvantaged communities (ethnic minorities,

IDPs) and asking for voters' IDs.

○ On E-Day, ruling party coordinators distributed cash in virtually every municipality. Many such incidents outside PECs were filmed and photographed and will be used in the United Opposition's legal challenge. • **Observer expulsions/assault/political violence:** Dozens of opposition proxies, as well as observers, were illegally expelled from PECs—and in some cases assaulted—to prevent reporting of violations. The day after the election, opposition leader Tako Charkviani and her husband **were assaulted by a group** of men in Kutaisi. Charkviani linked the attack to her political activity. At least one of the attackers was a government official of the ruling party.¹⁶ • **Voter control, intimidation and coercion:** While also reported by OSCE/ODIHR in the first round, government efforts to coerce and intimidate voters intensified significantly.

- Ruling party coordinators unlawfully utilized voters' lists with photographic identification and personal data at precincts throughout the country. This practice represented an unprecedented lever of control over public sector workers and amounted to election falsification due to its large-scale influence on voters' free will.
- **Following E-Day, a number of improperly invalidated ballots appeared to confirm such coercion of voters.** The ballots had Zurabishvili's name circled—presumably so the voter could take a photo of his/her ballot to show to employers or authorities as proof of supporting the ruling party—and then scratched out, with Vashadze's name ultimately circled. Such ballots should not have been invalidated, since they show clear voter intent. Moreover, the existence of such ballots is evidence voters' right to secrecy was violated.
- On 8 December, Ia Kerzaia, the principal of a Zugdidi public school who supported the opposition, died from complications of a stroke. Kerzaia's son alleges that **overwhelming pressure from the ruling party**—which has been reported to target public school employees nationwide—**contributed to her sudden death.**¹⁷
- Local criminal authorities were heavily involved alongside ruling party coordinators. The ODIHR preliminary assessment raised serious concerns about voter intimidation in the runoff, calling into question the freedom of voters to cast ballots without "fear of retribution" in line with Council of Europe and international standards.¹⁸
- Notably, **Vashadze won decisively (64.24%) in all electoral precincts abroad,** where government levers of control—intimidation and bribery—could not be exercised.¹⁹

United Opposition Response

The ruling party has claimed a decisive victory for Zurabishvili despite the widespread violations summarized above, which infringed on the fundamental right of Georgian voters to cast their vote in secret, free of fear or undue influence. The United Opposition has organized peaceful demonstrations and announced a criminal case against ruling party officials for voter bribery.²⁰ Outgoing president Giorgi Margvelashvili criticized the electoral violations and noted that the opposition's protest movement is a legitimate part of the democratic process.²¹ Despite the significant popular support for the opposition's demands, including snap elections to restore legitimacy and changes to electoral legislation to promote proportionality, the government has categorically refused to negotiate with the opposition.²²

¹¹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120235>

¹² <https://civil.ge/archives/267231>

¹³ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>; <https://civil.ge/archives/260625>

¹⁴ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

¹⁵ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ¹⁶

<http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120143>

¹⁷ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120816>

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> ¹⁹

<http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

²⁰ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120770>

²¹ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120219>

²² <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120220>

21 December 2018

GEORGIAN POLICE BLOCK OPPOSITION PROTESTERS ON INAUGURATION DAY; CLASHES ENSUE; OPPOSITION LEADER DETAINED FOR RALLY PARTICIPATION

Authorities' infringements on opposition supporters' constitutional rights draw sharp criticism from civil society, international community, and major pro-Western opposition parties

Background: Due to Fraud and Intimidation, Opposition Refuses to Accept Results of Presidential Election

The Georgian presidential election, particularly the second round on November 28, was marred by violations on a scale not seen in the country since 2003. Local electoral watchdogs and international observation missions reported "unprecedented voter bribery," ¹ open vote-buying, political violence, ² systematic coercion by government-aligned employers and criminal authorities³, multiple voting, expulsions of observers and opposition commission members from polling precincts, and violation of the right to ballot secrecy. Chatham House published a scathing assessment, citing observers' concerns as evidence that the ruling party's campaign "damaged [Georgia's] democratic credentials."⁴

Due to the serious and widespread nature of these violations, the United Opposition did not accept the result of the election as legitimate. Since the run-off, more evidences of systemic electoral fraud has emerged, including the use of fake IDs to facilitate multiple voting⁶ for Salome Zurbishvili, the candidate backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party.

These developments reinforced the United Opposition's decision to challenge the result of the election in court⁷, and in parallel, to demand snap parliamentary elections alongside reforms to implement a proportional electoral system, as continuously recommended by Georgia's international partners, such as the Venice Commission.

Despite the popular support for the opposition's demands, the government has categorically refused to negotiate with the opposition.⁸

Inauguration Day: Police Use Force to Block Opposition Protests, Infringing on Citizens' Constitutional Rights

Several days before Zurbishvili's inauguration – held in the town of Telavi, about 100km outside Tbilisi – the United Opposition announced a peaceful demonstration outside the ceremony. On December 16 (Inauguration Day), protest rallies took place across the country as planned.⁹ Thousands of opposition supporters attempted to drive from Tbilisi to Telavi but were stopped by police 40 kilometers from Telavi with roadblocks.¹⁰ The Georgian Constitution, as well as the Law on Freedom of Assembly, guarantees citizens freedom of both movement and assembly. The entire opposition spectrum, as well as the Ombudsman and Georgia's most reputable civil society watchdogs, stated that the authorities' blockage of the road was clearly illegal.

During tensions at the roadblocks, several unarmed citizens were beaten with batons and in some cases, the windshields of their cars were smashed (see photos attached). The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) faulted the opposition for "intentionally provoking" the crackdown, despite the fact that the United Opposition has consistently called for, and carried out, peaceful demonstrations in the framework of the law.¹¹

Ruling Party's Suppression of Opposition Draws International Rebuke and Civil Society Criticism

A group of 14 civil society organizations (CSOs) – including Transparency International, ISFED, and Open Society Georgia Foundation – issued a joint statement condemning the authorities for using force to violate

¹ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

² <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120143>

³ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true>

⁴ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/georgia-s-presidential-campaign-damages-its-democratic-credentials>

⁵ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120235>

⁶ <http://oc-media.org/georgian-government-printing-fake-id-cards-for-election-fraud/>

⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/270618>

⁸ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120220>

⁹ <https://civil.ge/archives/271207>

¹⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/271207>

¹¹ <https://police.ge/ge/shinagan-saqneta-saministros-gantskhadoba/12229>

opposition demonstrators' rights to "free movement, assembly and manifestation."¹² The CSOs also expressed alarm about the "recent negative tendency" of police in suppressing peaceful protests. United Opposition leader Grigol Vashadze announced "nonstop" demonstrations to include tents on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue, reiterating the opposition's commitment to lawfully exercising their constitutional rights to free speech and assembly. In a U.S. Embassy Tbilisi statement about the inauguration, acting Ambassador Ross Wilson stated that the U.S. is "very concerned" over the violent incidents, and the alarming message that the events of December 16 sent to Georgia's international partners about the trajectory of the country.¹³

Politically Motivated Arrests

On December 16, police clashed with a group of opposition supporters who were attempting to pass through an unlawful roadblock in the village of Velistsikhe, on the road from Tbilisi to Telavi for the Inauguration Day protest. In that group was David Kirkitadze, a political council member of the United National Movement (UNM), the largest party in the United Opposition coalition. Kirkitadze had been instrumental in organizing the opposition demonstrations, drawing scrutiny from the MIA and ruling party officials for his political activity.

On December 17, Kirkitadze was arrested detained on charges of "assaulting a law enforcement officer" and "damaging government property." Through his lawyer, Kirkitadze has denied all allegations and announced a hunger strike.¹⁴ The United Opposition holds that the charges against Kirkitadze amount to politically motivated selective justice. Over the past three days, opposition supporters have gathered outside the prison where Kirkitadze is being held to protest his detention.

MP Giga Bokeria of European Georgia, a pro-Western opposition party that is separate from the United Opposition, called the incident part of the ruling party's "illegal policy" and blamed the "illegitimate and unconstitutional actions of police." Bokeria added that Kirkitadze's arrest has broad implications that threaten democracy and internal stability in Georgia, calling the incident "a brazen message from [ruling party chairman] Ivanishvili's regime to the entire opposition that only those groups that are affiliated with the regime hold the license to violence, illegal and unconstitutional actions."¹⁵

In a press conference about Kirkitadze's detention, a MIA spokesperson warned that other arrests would follow, implying a broad crackdown on opposition sympathizers who participated in the protests. Already, the authorities appear to be fulfilling this promise of politically motivated retribution.

§ On December 18, opposition supporter Guram Donadze was summoned to court for sentencing—ostensibly for his involvement in a 2004 police operation while he was employed by the MIA. The judge sentenced Donadze to more than five years in prison. Due to the timing and harshness of the sentencing, Donadze views the ruling as retribution for his participation in anti-government protests and for his criticism of the ruling party during the presidential campaign.

§ On December 20, Farnaoz Chkadua of the opposition-aligned organization "Free Zone" (!"#\$\$%&'("(\$)*+ ") was reportedly summoned for sentencing on years-old charges related to his participation in antigovernment demonstrations. Like Kirkitadze, Chkadua played an instrumental role in the United Opposition campaign and the Inauguration Day protests. He is expected to face about five years in prison. The government's crackdown on peaceful demonstrations—and the escalation of politically motivated prosecution in the aftermath of Inauguration Day—is exacerbating civil unrest in Georgia at a time of heightened political tensions. While continuing to voice support for democratic institutions and human rights in Georgia, U.S. officials ought to urge Georgian authorities against imposing a prison sentence on Chkadua, and to demand an explanation for the detention of other opposition figures, namely Kirkitadze.

¹² <https://civil.ge/archives/271462>

¹³ <https://ge.usembassy.gov/ambassador-ross-wilson-cda-comment-on-inauguration-ceremony-december-16/>

¹⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/271587>

¹⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/271587>

The following materials were distributed to the below individuals via email in 2020:

- U.S. Embassy Tbilisi: Evan Elliott
- U.S. State Department - Caucasus Desk: Christopher Hallett, Thomas Tanner, Toby Davis
- International Republican Institute (IRI): John DiPirro
- National Democratic Institute (NDI) Peter Palmer, Natasha Rothchild
- U.S. Senate Foreign Relations committee staff: Jessica Elledge, Chris Socha
- U.S. House of Representatives staff: Miranda Moorman, Christopher Taylor, Connor Pfeiffer, Melissa Kelly, Tom Harvey, Daniel Tidwell, Ben Couhig, Kenneth DePew, Alex Stepahin, Matt Hodge, Devin Wiser
- US-Helsinki Commission staff: Paul Massaro, Everett Price
- Frontera Resources: Steve Nicandros

BACKGROUND: 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia

Since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. has strongly supported Georgia's democratic development and sovereignty. Following the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia became one of the world's top success stories in reforming the post-Soviet system. But since the Georgian Dream (GD) party came to power in 2012, Georgia's progress has turned into backsliding. State institutions have been eroded, corruption has grown, and the judiciary has been subordinated to the personal interests of GD officials.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia as the largest individual shareholder of Gazprom, is the chairman of GD. He is the most powerful man in the country but holds no government position¹⁴¹. Under Ivanishvili's informal rule, Georgia's once-promising democracy resembles Russia's power vertical under Vladimir Putin. Business, media, and civil society face undue pressure from the government. The judiciary facilitates "state capture" by the country's one oligarch and his inner circle¹⁴². In 2018, the DNI's *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* highlighted serious concerns with the ruling party's propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and causing internal problems as Georgia continues to face external threats from Russia.¹⁴³ High-level corruption, increased crime, economic stagnation, and a politicized justice system characterized by "clan-based governance" that "serves the interests of the ruling party" contribute to widespread popular discontent.¹⁴⁴

Under Ivanishvili, GD has recently escalated attempts to force out American investors in favor of investment from Russia, China, and Iran. Such hostile behavior not only harms the Georgian people, who face widespread poverty and unemployment, but also threatens the U.S.-Georgia relationship. Most troubling, GD officials are now openly advancing Russian interests at the expense of U.S. interests -- and the will of the Georgian people, who overwhelmingly support closer ties with the U.S.

For example:

- The Kremlin is known for using "pipeline diplomacy" to exert control over neighboring countries by exploiting their dependence on Russian gas. Energy independence would be decisive in securing Georgia's freedom from the Russian sphere of influence. Frontera Resources, the largest American investor in Georgia with over \$500 million invested since 1996, has identified oil and gas reserves which could enable Georgia to become energy independent. This would be transformative for Georgia's economy and national security, while dealing a death blow to Russian imperialism in Georgia. But instead of acting in Georgia's national interests, GD officials have sided with Moscow by waging a legal battle against Frontera and threatening to unlawfully terminate the company's contract.
- At the same time, GD officials have welcomed the Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom and its partners back to the Georgian market. One such partner is Austria's OMV, which has partnered with Gazprom on the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. The NDAA includes tougher sanctions against Nord Stream 2. Earlier this summer, the Georgian government selected

¹⁴¹ https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_georgias_gazprom_mystery5061

¹⁴² <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/01/31/state-capture-in-the-caucasus/>

¹⁴³ <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA---Unclassified-SSCI.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions>

OMV Petrom as the winning bidder for the oil and gas exploration block, Offshore Block II, in the Black Sea offshore Georgia.

- Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and other U.S. officials have noted the significance of the Anaklia deep-sea port to ensuring Georgia's economic independence from Russia and closer integration with the West. The Georgian government paid lip service to the idea of finishing the port, while the Kremlin has adamantly objected to the Anaklia project.¹⁴⁵ In the past year, it has become clear which side GD officials have chosen: The Georgian government has effectively stopped the project by canceling the contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC), which U.S. investor Conti Group exited late last year.¹⁴⁶ In July, ADC filed a \$1 billion arbitration claim against the Georgian government.¹⁴⁷
- In addition, Georgian American Alloys (Georgian Manganese)¹⁴⁸, Iconia Capital¹⁴⁹, and other American investors in Georgia have fallen victim to the predatory and politicized justice system, which is exploited by GD officials and their cronies for personal enrichment. It is no coincidence that the ruling party, which serves Russian interests, also does business in a manner that would not be out of place in Putin's Russia.

In spite of the ruling party's conciliatory approach toward Russia and hostility toward U.S. investment, the Georgian people remain steadfastly committed to democratic development and closer ties with the U.S. Research by International Republican Institute (IRI) in July 2020 found that 65% of Georgians consider the U.S. as the greatest political partner, while 82% consider Russia to be the greatest political threat¹⁵⁰. In this context, the parliamentary election on October 31, 2020 will be decisive. A free, fair election resulting in a peaceful transition of power would ensure that Georgia remains on the path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, a stronger relationship with the U.S., and freedom from the Russian sphere of influence. But despite increased pressure and engagement from Georgia's international partners, it is far from certain that GD and Ivanishvili will allow this.

Lead-up to 2020 election

A brief recap of the past year is crucial to understanding Georgia's pre-election environment today:

- In June 2019, street protests erupted during a visit by Russian Communist parliamentarian Sergey Gavrilov to Tbilisi, where he addressed the Georgian Parliament at the invitation of GD officials. Giorgi Gakharia, then-Interior Minister of Georgia, ordered police to disperse the demonstration with tear gas and rubber bullets, resulting in serious injuries to peaceful protesters. Gakharia drew criticism from local and international human rights organizations for using "disproportionate

¹⁴⁵ <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-discreet-satisfaction-over-georgias-anaklia-port-debacle/>

¹⁴⁶ <https://emerging-europe.com/news/conti-group-confirms-exit-from-anaklia-port-project/>

¹⁴⁷

<https://www.finchchannel.com/world/georgia/78137-anaklia-development-consortium-filed-a-lawsuit-against-georgia>

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/business/biz-monday/article172421852.html>

¹⁴⁹

<https://menafn.com/1098724446/CEO-of-Iconia-Capital-LLC-slams-Georgian-government-business-roads-how?src=Rss>

¹⁵⁰

https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_june_2020_general-aug_4_corrections_1.pdf

force” against anti-Russia protesters.¹⁵¹ The protests died down after Ivanishvili agreed to a key demand of protesters: Holding the 2020 parliamentary election under a fully proportional system. This reform would remove a built-in advantage to the ruling party in the 75 majoritarian seats (half of the total). In 2016, the last parliamentary election, GD won just under 49% in 2016 but still gained enough seats for a constitutional majority due to their majoritarians.¹⁵²

- In September 2019, Gakharia was appointed Prime Minister.
- In November 2019, this promise was broken when GD parliamentarians failed to pass the electoral reform bill. Street protests began and were forcefully dispersed with several opposition activists and politicians arrested.¹⁵³
- In March 2020, following months of protests from opposition parties and civil society movements, as well as active support in negotiations from the U.S. Embassy, GD and opposition leaders agreed to a new electoral system with 30 majoritarian seats and 120 proportional.¹⁵⁴ Parties must win at least 1% in order to be represented in parliament under the proportional system. This reform passed in June and was widely hailed as a step toward a free and fair election in the Fall.
- Following the agreement, Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili pardoned two opposition leaders (Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili) who had been in prison on politically motivated charges. U.S. Senator Jim Risch, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, had referred to them as well as media owner Giorgi Rurua as “political prisoners,” highlighting the undue influence of GD on the Georgian justice system. Rurua remains in prison, despite calls for his release from Sen. Risch and other international partners of Georgia.
- In Spring 2020, the Georgian government declared a state of emergency and imposed tight restrictions on economic activity and travel to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of infections has been relatively low, and GD has seized on this (as its only victory in 8 years of government). The majority of Georgians approve of the government’s response to COVID-19, but since the quarantine ended in June, economic concerns have come to the forefront among voters. The Georgian economy was devastated by the pandemic; GD’s crisis management plan failed to mitigate the effects or provide social support to people in need.¹⁵⁵ More than half of all Georgian households reported food insecurity during the pandemic.

¹⁵¹

<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/georgia/three-ngos-condemn-georgian-authorities-excessive-force-against>

¹⁵² http://gov.ge/files/58034_58034_905803_20161019Factsheetonelectionresults.pdf

¹⁵³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/15/protests-erupt-georgia-over-failed-electoral-reforms>

¹⁵⁴ <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/710>

¹⁵⁵

https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_june_2020_general-aug_4_corrections_1.pdf

A free, fair election and peaceful transition of power will be crucial for Georgia's democratic development. The efforts of our international partners have been invaluable in this direction. With the 2020 parliamentary election set for 31 October, the pre-election campaign has officially started.

Throughout the campaign, I will prepare brief newsletters for Georgia's international partners to share relevant updates on a regular basis. I am based in Tbilisi and in regular contact with the pro-Western opposition parties. This first newsletter covers a range of topics that may be of interest, including: Pre-election environment and possible violations, the state of coordination among opposition parties, and Russian interference in the election.

I appreciate your consideration and would welcome any questions or feedback.

GEORGIA ELECTION NEWSLETTER 1

I. Pre-election environment and reported violations

Recent elections in Georgia, including the 2018 presidential election, were marred by well-documented allegations¹⁵⁶ against the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party including "unprecedented voter bribery,"¹⁵⁷ abuse of state resources for an "uneven playing field"¹⁵⁸, the use of fake IDs¹⁵⁹, expulsions of observers and commission members from polling precincts, multiple voting and manipulation of the ballot count¹⁶⁰, and violations of the right to ballot secrecy. According to UK think tank Chatham House, the manner in which GD conducted the election "damaged Georgia's democratic credentials."¹⁶¹

Despite criticism from international partners, GD has already shown signs of a repeat performance in this pre-election period. **Of particular concern are vote-buying, coercion, and the misuse of administrative resources.** Today, GD can exploit the widespread hunger and poverty exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic for narrow political interests. For example: in July, socially vulnerable families reported that 2 municipal governments refused to provide pandemic-related social assistance because they do not support GD. In August, GD coordinators in Kobuleti were filmed distributing

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<https://www.rferl.org/a/zurabishvili-leads-georgia-vote-presidential-runoff-likely/29569348.html>

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<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/initiative-write-debts-represents-unprecedented-case-alleged-vote-buying>

¹⁵⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Preliminary Conclusions, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true>

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<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/investigation-instances-alleged-election-fraud-must-be-lauched>

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<https://www.ndi.org/publications/georgian-presidential-election-day-largely-orderly-sporadic-serious-violations-pre>

¹⁶¹

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/georgia-s-presidential-campaign-damages-its-democratic-credentials>

food to voters in exchange for promised electoral support. Local election watchdog ISFED has reported several other instances of possible vote-buying by GD candidates in the pre-election period so far.¹⁶²

The opposition has also reported political discrimination. Giorgi Vashadze's party **Strategy Builder** **has been fined 23 times in the total amount of 55,000 GEL (about \$18,000)**. The penalties refer to an administrative code that is irrelevant to campaigns, so they are appealing the fines.

II. Evidence of Russian election interference

As in recent elections, overt Russian interference in Georgia's political processes is alarming. The pro-Kremlin "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia" (APG) party is at the center of a new scandal after a report was released by investigative outlet "Dossier" detailing APG's requests for budget assistance and pre-election consulting from the Kremlin to "stir up controversy among voters and intensify anti-Western propaganda"¹⁶³. For example, APG's billboards raised controversy by implying that Turkey is pursuing occupation of the Adjara region.¹⁶⁴ APG has confirmed that Moscow-based consulting firm POLITSECRETS is working on their campaign but denies receiving funds from the Kremlin.¹⁶⁵

Opposition leaders demanded an investigation into APG's campaign and the party's ties to Russia. The Georgian government has announced that the State Audit Office, rather than the prosecutor or security services, will investigate the source of APG's funding.¹⁶⁶ This response is absolutely inadequate: As Russia is partially occupied by Georgia, a political party receiving funds from the Kremlin would be a serious national security concern and thus the competency of the state security services and prosecutor's office. It is especially alarming that APG leaders Irma Inashvili and Giorgi Lomia made an unannounced visit to Russian-occupied territory of Abkhazia on 18 August; this would have been an opportunity for APG to receive cash they requested from Moscow.¹⁶⁷

Georgian Dream's ties to pro-Russian Patriot Alliance: The government's lackluster response to APG's activities comes as no surprise, because APG has long functioned as a "pocket opposition" party serving GD's interests rather than a genuine opposition political force. APG criticizes pro-Western opposition parties rather than GD; before the second round of the 2018 presidential

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<https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-monitoringis-ii-shualeduri-angarishi>

¹⁶³

<https://dossier.center/georgia/?fbclid=IwAR1Lpmsh-eui8dEEEniq2Q4cQJOEqyC62tYvdUslejz9X5avo3ccmJDgOKPA>

¹⁶⁴

<https://oc-media.org/election-campaign-officially-kicks-off-in-georgia-as-poll-date-set-for-31-october/>

¹⁶⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/364520>

¹⁶⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/364520>

¹⁶⁷ <https://jam-news.net/alliance-of-patriots-abkhazia-visit-lasha-sakania/>

election, APG organized mass rallies against the United Opposition candidate. In August, a Georgian Dream MP expressed willingness to form a coalition government with APG.¹⁶⁸

III. Coordination among opposition parties

GD and a number of opposition parties have started their pre-election campaigns. The main opposition parties are pro-Western and criticize GD for its pro-Russian orientation. The largest opposition party is United National Movement (UNM), the party of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, followed by European Georgia, which broke off from UNM after the 2016 election. According to the July IRI poll, if the election were held tomorrow, parties would win the following support:

- 33% GD
- 28% did not know or refused to answer (we assume many of these are opposition-leaning, because opposition voters are more likely to hide their political views)
- 16% UNM (Mikheil Saakashvili)
- 5% European Georgia (Giga Bokeria / Gigi Ugulava)
- 3% Strategy Builder (Giorgi Vashadze for Prime Minister)
- 3% Alliance of Patriots (pro-Kremlin party)
- 2% Lelo (Mamuka Khazaradze / Badri Japaridze)
- 2% Labour (Shalva Natelashvili)

More than 30 opposition parties across the political spectrum are coordinating support of two common goals: Ensuring a free and fair election, and defeating Georgian Dream. They have signed an agreement to rule out cooperation with GD and to defend the integrity of the election process so that the vote of each citizen counts. In addition, some of the largest opposition parties -- UNM, European Georgia, Girchi, and Strategy Builder — have agreed to support a set of liberal reforms if elected. All are pro-Western opposition parties; their leaders have spoken out in support of closer U.S.-Georgia cooperation and the importance of creating an environment where U.S. investors are welcomed and treated fairly. To this end, they support reforms to strengthen the rule of law, liberalize the economy, and ensure impartiality of the courts. Most importantly, they are working for a peaceful transition of power in a free, fair election to put an end to informal oligarchic rule under Ivanishvili and his party.

The common agenda includes:

- reforming and decentralizing the police and de-politicizing law enforcement,
- forming a standalone anti-corruption agency,
- limiting government spending to 20% of GDP.
- Reforming the judiciary to ensure independence and impartiality is also a top priority.

Saakashvili accepts UNM nomination for PM but rules out returning to Georgia before election

Former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili in late August made a video address announcing his return to Georgia. Saakashvili, who is currently based in Ukraine and wanted on politically-motivated charges in Georgia, has been nominated by UNM as its prime minister candidate. Only UNM, the largest opposition party, is openly aligned with Saakashvili — although several other opposition parties would be willing to form a coalition with UNM after the election.

¹⁶⁸

<https://vestnikkavkaza.net/analysis/What-should-Russia-expect-from-parliamentary-elections-in-Georgia.html>

Although UNM does not have a majority of votes, the percentage of stable supporters that they do have (18-25%) is essential for the opposition to win an election and form a government.

In a televised address on September 7, Saakashvili accepted the nomination of UNM for Prime Minister, but said he would only serve for two years at most in this position. As Saakashvili does not hold Georgian citizenship, the PM nomination appears to be a symbolic move to energize the UNM base. Saakashvili said that he would only come back to Georgia at a time when his return would not cause “unrest.” Effectively, he ruled out returning before the election.

GD majoritarian defects to UNM: In early September, a former Georgian Dream majoritarian and currently independent member of parliament, Kakha Okriashvili, joined the UNM-led “United Opposition” coalition and voiced his support for Saakashvili as Prime Minister. Okriashvili is a prominent businessman who owns a major pharmaceutical & healthcare company in Georgia. His decision to run as a majoritarian candidate under UNM’s party number will likely increase the total vote count of the United Opposition and flip Okriashvili’s home district (Dmanisi) to the opposition. Okriashvili’s move also shows that business owners in Georgia have started to reject the status quo of the state captured economy under Ivanishvili. It is worth noting that much of Okriashvili’s business depends on government contracts, so some analysts have suggested that he switched parties because he expects GD to be defeated and wants to preserve his business with the future government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To stand with the people of Georgia, Georgia’s international partners must continue to stress the importance of a free and fair election. U.S. officials should highlight the significance of the 2020 parliamentary election and the importance of a peaceful transition of power for Georgia’s democratic development.

- The integrity of this election should be evaluated in a holistic manner, including reports from the polls as well as reports on disinformation in the media, government criticism of civil society, and targeted voter suppression in the weeks leading up to the election.
- International partners of Georgia should consider reports from Georgian civil society, media, and opposition parties about voter intimidation and bribery in the lead-up to the election, rather than focusing exclusively on violations at the polling stations on Election Day. Past experience has shown that most election manipulation by GD takes place in the weeks before the election.
- If the pandemic situation makes it impossible for U.S. organizations like IRI and NDI to send observers, alternatives should be considered to ensure that international observers will be able to monitor the election. The presence of international observers — whether they are from IRI/NDI, congressional offices, or other organizations — is one of the only checks on GD’s behavior on Election Day. As of now, Georgia is one of the world’s safest countries in terms of COVID-19, with a very low infection rate. GD officials have stated that international observers will be allowed to arrive and exempt from quarantine, as long as they take a rapid test.
- The epidemic situation and air traffic restrictions cast doubt on the effective monitoring of the 2020 parliamentary elections by the International Election Observation Mission. An insufficient number of foreign observers can be compensated with the strengthening and support of local organizations by international monitoring missions.

Georgian Parliamentary Election 2020: International Newsletter

24 October 2020

Background: The ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) has failed to incorporate most of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations issued after the 2018 presidential elections to ensure a free, fair, and peaceful campaign. Before the parliamentary election, GD has only intensified the behavior that marred the presidential election: Organized political violence to terrorize the opposition, misuse of administrative resources to exacerbate an uneven playing field, and irregularities that compromise the neutrality and trust of electoral administration. The COVID-19 pandemic presents additional opportunities for the ruling party to manipulate voters and electoral institutions, including the Central Election Commission (CEC) and its procedures, as new infection numbers are skyrocketing.

The weaponization of disinformation by the ruling party, its activists, and pro-government media aims at manipulating public opinion against the opposition parties and discouraging opposition voters from exercising their rights to participate in political processes. Pro-Russian far-right elements often use disinformation to spread the same narratives as the ruling party.

I. GD uses political violence, intimidation of opposition in pre-election campaign

Instances of political violence and intimidation by the ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) have marred recent elections in Georgia and escalated during this pre-election period. Such acts are aimed at instilling fear and unrest in the run-up to elections. For example:

- **19 October:** Levan Mikeladze, member of the United Opposition campaign office in Bolnisi supporting majoritarian MP candidate Kakha Okriashvili, was driving from Nakhiduri to Tbilisi when two cars began following him. Six gunshots were fired at Mikeladze's car, and one of the cars pursuing Mikeladze intentionally crashed into him. Video footage shows bullet holes in Mikeladze's vehicle. GD member of Bolnisi Municipal Assembly, Beka Tsakadze, was [identified](#) as one of the attackers.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs has opened an investigation into the incident under Articles 187 and 236 of the Criminal Code, involving damage or destruction of property, and illegal purchase, storage, carrying, manufacturing, transportation, forwarding or sale of firearms. **These charges are inadequate for the severity of the incident**, considering that the bullets that hit Mikeladze's car could have seriously wounded or killed Mikeladze and his passenger.
- **21 October:** Zura Okmelashvili, a GD activist working for MP candidate Gogi Meshveliani (according to Okmelashvili's social media photos), shot and wounded other GD activists from the Dmanisi party office. United Opposition candidate Kakha Okriashvili [identified](#) Okmelashvili as one of the GD members who had attacked Mikeladze and another opposition member on 19 October. Okriashvili again called for an immediate and fair police investigation into the incident.

- Throughout October, a number of opposition activists and campaign workers/volunteers have received **threatening SMS messages on their personal phones** from unknown numbers. The messages are not personalized and appear to be part of a coordinated campaign, by the ruling party and/or state security services, to intimidate opposition supporters in the pre-election period.
- Campaign staff of Khatia Dekanoidze, the UNM majoritarian candidate in Isani district, received threatening messages last week. Around the same time, **Dekanoidze reported that she found a [hidden recording device](#) in her campaign office**, which she believes had been placed by the state security service.

Regrettably, these are just a few of the incidents of political violence and intimidation by ruling party representatives against opposition activists, voters, and candidates.

Notable is the clear pattern of victim-blaming by the ruling party and government officials: GD officials claim that their party is campaigning peacefully and groundlessly blame the opposition for staging provocations. For example, GD leader Irakli Kobakhidze [claimed](#) without evidence that UNM activists had attacked the GD office in Dmanisi on 21 October. Furthermore, pre-election intimidation highlights the alarming politicization of law enforcement and the state security services.

II. GD and pro-Russian groups weaponize disinformation to manipulate public, discredit opposition

Against the troubling background of repressions, government officials and GD-aligned media continue to spread hate speech that intensifies polarization. Disinformation and "fake news" is spread in a coordinated manner, by a network of GD activists on social media and by GD-friendly media outlets like Imedi TV, to discredit the opposition and to manipulate voters during the pre-election period. It is worth noting that pro-Russian elements in Georgia, such as the far-right Georgian March party and the Alliance of Patriots-aligned TV channel Obieqtivi, often spread the same narratives as the ruling party against the opposition.

A dramatic example of such disinformation operations was shown on 21 October, when a masked gunman entered a bank in Zugdidi and took 19 employees and customers as hostages. The standoff lasted for hours, as the gunman demanded \$500,000 to release the hostages. He communicated this demand through Irakli Kvaratskhelia, one of the hostages, who was in contact with TV channel Mtavari Arkhi during the standoff. During the special operation:

- Self-identified Georgian Dream activists and party members on Facebook found Kvaratskhelia's personal account and published photos, in which Kvaratskhelia is pictured together with UNM leaders. A network of hundreds of activists and bots spread these photos on social media with a caption implying that UNM had organized the bank robbery / hostage crisis as a "pre-election show." Needless to say, this is absolutely false; Kvaratskhelia was one of the innocent victims in the incident and his political views were completely irrelevant to the crime.

- GD leader Mamuka Mdinaradze “[allowed](#) that it could be a coincidence” that Kvaratskhelia is a supporter of UNM, fueling the fire of conspiracy theories.
- Georgian Public Broadcaster Board Member Bondo Mdzinashvili, known for anti-Western, xenophobic statements and [hate speech](#), published a series of inflammatory and false posts on his public Facebook page. Mdzinashvili, a sitting government official, [claimed](#) that the hostage crisis was “staged by the UNM cult.” Mdzinashvili’s posts were removed by Facebook for violating Community Standards, but not before this disinformation was spread widely, discrediting the opposition and manipulating the public during an ongoing special operation.
- Pro-government disinformation portal [XNEWS.GE](#), which recently spread fake news about a coronavirus outbreak in UNM candidate Nika Melia’s office, published Mdzinashvili’s posts as well as several other false articles blaming UNM for the hostage crisis in Zugdidi.
- Pro-government channel Imedi TV, while reporting on the standoff, aired an [interview](#) with a far-right Georgian March activist who claimed that Kvaratskhelia had arrived in Zugdidi for a “provocation” planned by UNM.

Such a coordinated disinformation operation — with the participation of pro-Russian elements alongside Georgian Dream activists and media — is not only slanderous against the opposition, but dangerous for the victims of this crime. Fortunately, all the hostages were released unharmed. However, the crisis received enormous national attention, and the false allegations of UNM involvement reached an audience of hundreds of thousands. People targeted by this disinformation operation may believe UNM staged a bank robbery and hostage crisis, and this raises tensions in an already polarized and tense pre-election environment. The spread of this disinformation also poses a danger to Kvaratskhelia and the opposition party members, whose names and photos have been publicized and falsely implicated in organizing the attack.

III. Government’s COVID politics: New decrees from CEC call into question transparency of voting procedures for hospitalized or self-isolated persons

Previous reports have detailed how the government and ruling party have been using the COVID-19 pandemic to achieve their narrow political interests, rather than addressing the health and economic crises for the broader social good. Election watchdog organizations have raised concerns about the government’s pandemic-related social assistance programs being improperly politicized by ruling party officials during the pre-election campaign, which may be perceived as vote-buying. Moreover, international election observation missions are severely limited in terms of on-the-ground capacity due to the COVID-19 situation.

In addition, the recent uncontrolled explosion of COVID-19 infections in Georgia, and the government’s inadequate response to this crisis, raises questions about whether all voters will be able to exercise their rights safely. **There are currently 36,000 people in self-isolation or quarantine, up to 2% of Georgian voters.** Given the rapid increase in new cases, even more people will be in quarantine or self-isolation on Election Day.

According to the decrees issued by the Central Election Commission (CEC), 127 special precincts have been created for persons in quarantine or self-isolation due to COVID-19. Special commissions have also been created to administer the voting procedures for these individuals.

There are several potential problems with these new CEC decrees, which can be exploited by the ruling party authorities in order to falsify the vote count:

- The special precinct voter lists are provided to the CEC by the state institutions, finalized on October 28th, and become available for the parties only one day before elections. The parties do not have any possibility to verify the voter lists.
- The special groups, including the appointment of party representatives, are completed before the number of voters is known. Therefore, it is unclear how many mobile boxes will be used by the special groups. Thus, the party representatives and observer organizations may be deprived of their rights to follow the mobile boxes and observe the voting process.
- Voters in self-isolation do not go through the inking procedure, which may enable cases of multiple voting.
- Special lists are approved on October 28th, while the period for voters to request the registration on special lists by calling the CEC hotline is defined during 23-26 October. Reduction of registration period to four days will deprive the citizens who will move to quarantine or self-isolation between 26-30 October of their right to vote.
- Persons in self-isolation or quarantine will not be marked on table lists as "on special lists". Again, the political parties will not be able to verify the special lists until October 30th, which is the day before the election and does not give parties sufficient time to complete this task.
- The CEC has not elaborated clear rules on providing observers and party representatives with the necessary personal protective equipment.
- The CEC hires cleaning personnel at precincts, who will be entered into the special lists and able to vote. The process of recruitment of these employees is completely non-transparent.
- If on election day less than 7 PEC members show up at the polling station, the election administration is authorized to transform the commission into a special group, cancel the sortition, and authorize the Chair with power of distribution of functions among the commission members based on his individual decision. Besides, the DEC's shall substitute the special groups with new members. There are no criteria defined on selection of new members. The lists of substitute members are unknown.

We call on Georgia's international partners to request that the CEC address these issues immediately, to reach a fair and transparent resolution before Election Day.

Low turnout — due to fears of COVID, confusion about election procedures, inadequate safety measures, or possible restrictions on movement — is likely to confer an unfair advantage on the ruling party, which is able to mobilize its base of public employees and their families. The protection of voting rights for all citizens, including the COVID-infected, quarantined, and self-isolated voters, is essential for a free and fair election under these challenging conditions. However, the procedures to allow these

voters to participate in the election must not allow for any uncertainty in the vote count or any additional opportunities for falsification of the election.

Georgian Parliamentary Election 2020: International Newsletter

29 October 2020

Background: The ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) has failed to incorporate most of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations issued after the presidential elections to ensure a free, fair, and peaceful campaign. Before the parliamentary election, GD has intensified the behavior that marred the presidential contest: organized political violence, misuse of administrative resources, and irregularities in electoral administration. The COVID-19 pandemic presents additional opportunities for the ruling party to manipulate voters and suppress turnout as new infections are skyrocketing. The weaponization of disinformation by the ruling party and pro-government media aims at manipulating public opinion and discouraging opposition voters participating in political processes. Pro-Russian far-right elements often use disinformation to spread the same narratives as GD.

I. GD uses threats, hate speech, disinfo to intimidate and discredit opposition

- **30 October:** GD Executive Secretary Irakli Kobakhidze gave a [briefing](#) in which he accused UNM leaders Dimitri Shashkin, Nika Melia, and Devi Chankotadze of planning violent unrest and provocations on Election Day. Kobakhidze claimed that UNM was mobilizing groups of former soldiers and policemen, armed with guns, batons, tasers, and brass knuckles, in various regions of Georgia including: Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Marneuli, Zugdidi, Batumi, and Gldani district of Tbilisi. Kobakhidze's claims are completely false, and he did not offer any evidence to support them. In addition to slandering the democratic opposition, Kobakhidze's baseless attacks increase polarization and tensions on the eve of the election.
- **27 October:** Nanuka Zhorzholiani, the United Opposition majoritarian candidate for the Samtredia, Tskaltubo, and Khoni municipalities, [published a threat](#) that she received from a ruling party official via Facebook. Sopiko Kikacheishvili, the representative of Melauri village in Samtredia and an active member of GD, referred to Ms Zhorzholiani with a misogynistic slur and warned her against campaigning in Samtredia. After Ms Zhorzholiani published the post, opposition leaders have called for a swift and impartial investigation. GD has not condemned or even commented on Kikacheishvili's threats and hate speech.
- **27 October:** Flyers printed with disinformation targeting Khatia Dekanoidze, the UNM majoritarian candidate, as well as another opposition majoritarian candidate Giorgi Vashadze, were spread in the Isani district of Tbilisi. The flyers are written in Georgian and Armenian, targeting the large ethnic-Armenian community in Isani (*please see the photos enclosed at the end of this*

document). They include photos of the opposition candidates with former president Mikheil Saakashvili as well as out-of-context quotes from Saakashvili, which may be perceived as offensive to Armenians, such as "Karabakh is Azerbaijan." In fact Saakashvili made this [statement](#) as part of a longer and more nuanced [post](#) on social media, in which he expressed support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan within the internationally recognized borders, including Nagorno-Karabakh. (This is the official Tbilisi position as well).

- The disinformation campaign with the bilingual flyers is alarming because it is aimed at manipulating emotional topics, and attempts to foment divisions that risk raising ethnic tensions, especially with the ongoing situation in Nagorno Karabakh. At the same time, GD's false narratives endanger Armenians who might support any opposition party. Because of this campaign, other community members might believe them to be "betraying" interests of Armenians by supporting candidates connected to Saakashvili. During the 2018 presidential campaign, GD activists [attacked](#) the United Opposition office in Akhalkalaki (where many ethnic Armenians live) and seriously injured several opposition members. If this disinformation campaign in Isani is not stopped immediately, there is a risk that the situation might escalate into political violence yet again.
- **28 October:** In another area with a large ethnic minority community, Pankisi (home to the Kists, Georgian Chechens), GD authorities are intimidating voters. GD coordinators are visiting homes of socially vulnerable families and threatening to withdraw state assistance if they do not vote for GD. This was reported by Malkhaz Machalikashvili, a Kist community leader and activist whose son Temirlan was [killed](#) by state security services in a botched raid in December 2017.

II. Amid COVID-19 pandemic, GD attempts to unfairly leverage electoral administration for partisan interests

Previous reports have detailed how the government and ruling party have been exerting improper influence on the District Election Commissions (DECs). Moreover, the new Central Election Commission (CEC) decrees about voting during the COVID-19 pandemic have many shortcomings that may be exploited by GD for an unfair advantage.

The recent explosion of COVID-19 infections in Georgia, and the government's inadequate response to this crisis, raises questions about whether all voters will be able to exercise their rights safely.

- **There are currently ~40,000 people in self-isolation or quarantine, about 2% of Georgian voters.** Given the rapid increase in new cases, there is no way to predict how many people will be in quarantine or self-isolation on Election Day. Transparency International director Eka Gigauri criticized the fact that "40,000 people were only given two days to register" and the system was unprepared for that.
- About 10,000 voters in quarantine have registered for the special precincts. [Reports](#) from opposition candidate Helen Khoshtaria and election observers indicate that a number of self-isolated persons have been attempting to request registration for the mobile ballot box service via CEC hotline without any success.

- Transparency International raised [concerns](#) that voters in self-isolation are not sufficiently informed that they cannot be included in the mobile ballot box list without contacting the Ministry of Health first. After calling the CEC hotline with a registration request, voters have been transferred to the Health Ministry's hotline, leading to an overload of both hotline services. Even after the registration deadline was extended until yesterday, the Health Ministry incorrectly told eligible voters via its hotline that the registration process had already been concluded. The shortcomings in election administration threaten to disenfranchise thousands of self-isolated and quarantined voters, depriving them of their rights.
- According to the decrees issued by the CEC, 127 special precincts have been created for persons in quarantine or self-isolation due to COVID-19. Special commissions have also been created to administer the voting procedures for these individuals. *Our newsletter of 24 October details some potential problems with these procedures.*

Georgian citizens living abroad, who are unable to return to Georgia due to pandemic restrictions on travel and other issues, have reported inappropriate politicization of the election administration. For example, a number of Georgian emigrants in New York were contacted on October 26-27 by unknown individuals asking how and when they would go to vote at the Georgian Consulate on Election Day. Opposition voters in the Georgian emigrant community received these calls and text messages at their personal mobile numbers, raising concerns that their personal information had been leaked by the consulate. The Consulate General of Georgia in New York, Diana Zhgenti, is married to Georgian Dream majoritarian MP candidate Irakli Chikovani, which also raises questions about whether the consulate can remain impartial amid an apparent conflict of interest.

III. Without evidence, GD officials accuse opposition of spreading “deepfakes” and planning unrest

- **26 October:** GD campaign chief Irakli Kobakhidze [claimed](#) that “representatives of the radical opposition” are planning to create fake content, “using programs such as, for example, deepfake” – a form of hyper-realistic deceptive synthetic media — to spread disinformation about GD via social media on Election Day. As Kobakhidze did not present any examples or evidence to support his accusations, his briefing on this topic appeared to be aimed solely at spreading false narratives to discredit the democratic opposition. Kobakhidze likely made these unsupported and inflammatory statements to dissuade voters from paying attention to opposition campaigns or media in the run-up to the election.
- **27 October:** GD leader and MP candidate Tea Tsulukiani gave a press briefing in which she accused a number of CEC-registered election observer organizations, including impartial watchdogs, of being controlled by opposition political parties. Tsulukiani further accused these election observer organizations in conspiring with opposition parties to foment civil unrest after the election, by protesting the results when GD wins “with 60% support” (as Tsulukiani claims the election result will be).
- In fact, all the election observer organizations are registered with CEC in accordance with Georgian law, which allows supporters of opposition parties to register as election

observers. There are some election watchdogs aligned with opposition parties, but others which Tsulukiani named are completely nonpartisan, including Civil Platform 2020 and Governance Monitoring Center (GMC). It is also worth noting that many registered election observers are politically aligned with GD, but Tsulukiani neglected to mention those, instead focusing her criticism and unfounded accusations against neutral and opposition observers.

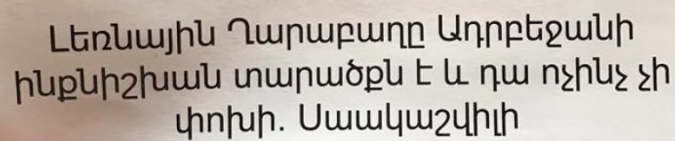
- Independent polls from IRI, NDI, Edison, and Ipsos show very different results from the GD-supported Survation research, to which Tsulukiani referred in making the assertion that GD will win with 60 percent. The French research firm Ipsos conducted its fourth and final pre-election poll from 17-27 October and found the following party ratings, with allocation:
 - *Georgian Dream*: 40%
 - *United Opposition / UNM*: 33%
 - *Strategy Aghmashenebeli*: 7%
 - *European Georgia*: 7%
 - *Lelo*: 4%
 - *Labour*: 2%
 - *Girchi*: 2%
 - *Alliance of Patriots*: 2%
 - *United Georgia*: 1%
 - *Citizens*: 1%
 - *Other parties - not specified*: 1%

In this context, the recent statements from Kobakhidze, Tsulukiani, and other GD officials are alarming, because they indicate that the ruling party may attempt to falsify the election results if GD is defeated on 31 October. Tsulukiani's claim that GD has 60% support is simply unfounded, and her attempts to discredit registered election observers may be perceived as a pre-emptive response to protests against eventual election falsification. This is highly concerning, as it suggests that the government's position is that the only "legitimate" result of the election would be a decisive victory for GD. If GD is defeated and the vote count is manipulated to achieve such a result, the consequences could be very serious for Georgia's stability and democratic development.

Summary

To summarize, our firsthand experience in this pre-election period has reflected the same concerns that Transparency International Georgia highlighted in their [interim report](#) on 26 October: Political violence organized by the ruling party against the opposition, property damage targeting the opposition campaign offices and materials, abuse of administrative resources to include dismissals of public sector employees who do not support GD, problems with the composition of electoral commissions that may undermine the integrity of the vote count, and the use of state security services to intimidate and investigate political opponents.

We, members of Georgia's democratic opposition, respectfully call on Georgia's international partners to condemn such behavior, which runs counter to the ideals of a free, fair election and a peaceful transition of power.



მართალი გითხრათ, იმდენი
საპატიო დოქტორობა მაქვს,
ნამდვილად არ მახსოვდა, თუ
ერევნის რომელიღაც
უნივერსიტეტის საპატიო დოქტორობაც
მქონდა. ღმერთმა ხელი მოუშაროს,
მაგრამ ამით ჩინები მე ნამდვილად არ
მომაკლდება.



Անկեղծ ասած, այնքան պատվավոր դոկտորի կոչում ունենալն էլ հիշել, որ ունեցել եմ Երևանի որևէ համալսարանի պատվավոր դոկտորի կոչում: Աստված թող իրեն ձեռք մեկնի, դրանով իմ կոչումները չեն պակասի:



Political violence against the opposition has marred the pre-election campaign, Election Day, and the aftermath of the contested election on October 31. Criminal elements aligned with the ruling Georgian Dream party have been responsible for most of the incidents of political violence. UNM, as the largest opposition party, has borne the brunt of these attacks. In the past few days, UNM offices have been vandalized for the purposes of political intimidation:

- **November 16:** Between 5:00-6:00 in the morning, opposition majoritarian candidate Nika Melia's office in Gldani (Tbilisi) was burned in an act of arson. Bottles were found inside the remains of the office, indicating that the attackers had thrown Molotov cocktails into the office to cause the fire. The attackers, at this point unidentified, also broke the windows with stones. The entire office interior and inventory has been destroyed. An investigation has been launched under the criminal code.
- **November 15:** The Batumi UNM office was attacked by unknown individuals, who broke the windows by throwing stones into the office.
- **November 15:** A branded bus used in the campaign of Khatia Dekanoidze, the UNM majoritarian candidate for Isani (Tbilisi), was seriously damaged when unknown attackers threw rocks through the windows.

This escalation of vandalism targeting UNM is disturbing, especially because three attacks occurred in just 48 hours in different parts of the country. This suggests systematic political intimidation following the falsified election and the opposition's decision to reject the results. The opposition has engaged in completely peaceful protests and will continue to do so, despite the threats from the ruling party and its aligned criminal elements.

As noted in previous reports, the law enforcement institutions in Georgia are highly politicized and manipulated by the ruling party. During the pre-election campaign, police investigations led to several criminal charges against some of the perpetrators of violence against UNM and opposition media representatives. However, the organizers of the attacks have largely gone unpunished, and as for those who do face charges, the criminal charges generally do not correspond to the seriousness of the crimes (e.g., Georgian Dream activists who fired a gun at a UNM member's car last month were not charged with attempted murder).

Therefore, we call on Georgia's international partners to condemn political violence in the strongest terms. We ask for your support in calling for a swift, fair, and impartial investigation into the crimes listed above, so that justice may be served, to promote peace and stability in Georgia during this challenging time.

(Please find the photos of the 3 incidents attached).